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Hitler's Home Guard: *Volkssturmmann*

Western Front, 1944–45



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Western Front, 1944–45



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Author's note

Although the *Volkssturmmann* Otto Dekker, whose experiences are depicted in this book, is fictitious, his unit, Battalion 38/20, was real. The activities of this unit are documented in the largest extant collection of Volkssturm battalion records. These documents form a historically accurate and valuable basis for this account of a typical *Volkssturmmann*'s experiences on the Western Front in 1944 and 1945.

Battalion 38/20 bore this official standard designation as a part of the German Volkssturm. During the unit's training period at the Westfalenwall it was known as Field Battalion E, then Field Battalion VI. Once it was mobilized into active service with the 1st Parachute Army, it was referred to initially as Battalion "Thiet" (after the initial commander) and then as Battalion "Rückriem" in order to disguise the unit's identity. For consistency's sake, the text refers to the unit's official Volkssturm designation as Battalion 38/20 throughout.

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Artist's note

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HITLER'S HOME GUARD: VOLKSSTURMMANN, WESTERN FRONT, 1944-45

INTRODUCTION

The summer of 1944 had brought two sledgehammer blows against the Third Reich: the invasion of Normandy and Operation *Bagration* or, as the Germans descriptively named it, the Destruction of Army Group Center. Hitler and his lieutenants believed that Nazi Germany needed additional troops and a fanaticization of its will to reverse the course of the war, and part of their response was the creation of the German Volkssturm. This militia consisted of all civilian German men aged 16 to 60 and existed to help the armed forces, the Wehrmacht, wage a bitter struggle for every city, town, and village in Germany. Because creating this resistance would require fanatical commitment, Hitler chose to have the Nazi Party organize and administer the force in the belief that the Party had superior motivational expertise.

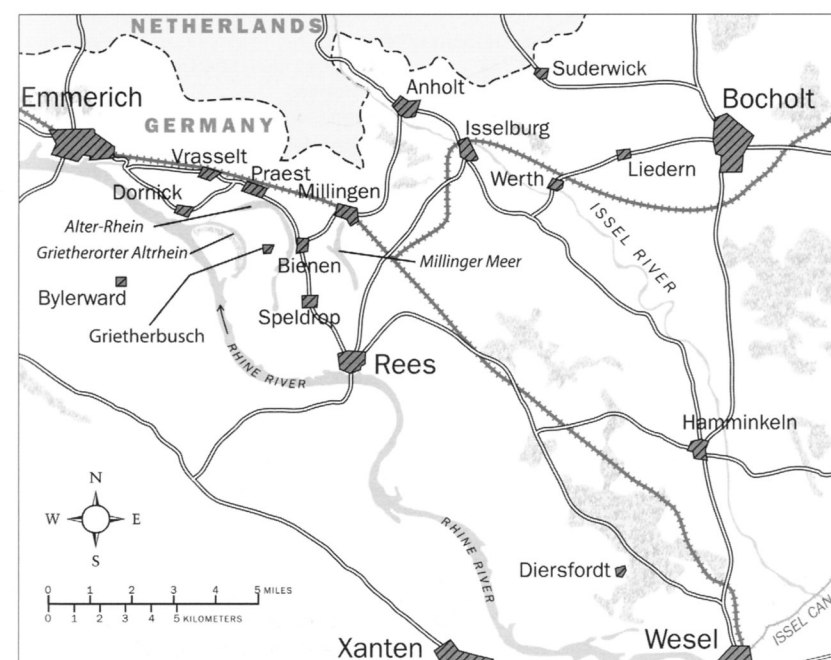
The Volkssturm was not as unified and uniform as most military organizations. Given that the largest units were battalions and that the militia existed primarily for local defense, it was at the local (or *Kreis*) level that most Volkssturm activity actually occurred. Moreover, Volkssturm personnel were divided into four distinct "levies" (*Aufgeböte*). Levy IV contained men of limited physical ability who were only used for security duties. Levy III was for youths aged 16 to 20, and these units were under Hitler Youth (Hitler Jugend, or HJ) auspices and were typically evacuated rather than committed to battle in the Volkssturm's local defense role. Although some HJ units did see action, particularly around Berlin,



LEFT A Volkssturm squad, equipped with a Russian Degtyarev DP27 light machine-gun and Italian Mannlicher-Carcano rifles, man a slit-trench on the edge of a field in a local defense tactical drill. (Courtesy of Michael Heidler Collection)

contrary to the popular image these were the exception rather than the rule. The bulk of Volkssturm men were in either Levy I or Levy II battalions. Assignment to these levies was based upon a determination of the significance of the individual member's civilian occupation. Since Levy I units could be called up to serve anywhere within their home region, or *Gau*, and Levy II units were only used within their home *Kreis*, Levy II status deferred a man's active Volkssturm service. Lastly, Volkssturm units that fought the Soviets typically had different motivations, different relations with the Wehrmacht, and a more extensive, varied, and successful combat record than did their western counterparts.

Given these variations, it might seem misleading to create a single "typical" *Volkssturmmann*. This book focuses upon a fictional member (named Otto Dekker) of an actual unit whose experiences, while considerably more extensive than most, covered the range of activities in which Volkssturm units in western Germany engaged. This Levy I battalion, officially designated as 38/20 (for the 20th Battalion of Gau Westphalia North), was raised in the Isselburg area in the fall of 1944 and activated for an extended training session in late 1944. In January 1945 the unit's role expanded into security occupation and construction duties – and further training – in the so-called "Westfalenwall" (a rather exaggerated title). Finally, in March 1945, it became a combat infantry battalion attached to the 6th Parachute Division defending the Rhine River. Here it fought briefly against the Canadian 9th Infantry Brigade's advance as part of Operation *Plunder* in late March, when the unit collapsed and its personnel became prisoners. While few Volkssturm men would have had all these experiences, almost all of them would have had some. Thus this unit's actual experiences in organization, training, labor, security occupation, and combat can help us gain insight into how western German Volkssturm men experienced the final months of World War II.



LEFT Map of the northwest German region where Volkssturm Battalion 38/20 served. (Courtesy of John Yelton)

CHRONOLOGY

1944			
May	Allied air forces begin assaulting German transportation net in preparation for D-Day invasions.	October 15	Horthy government in Hungary seeks armistice, but is deposed by German intervention.
June 4	Allied troops enter Rome.	October 16	Soviet forces begin offensive into East Prussia, Volkssturm formations assist in the defense, suffer heavy casualties.
June 6	Western Allies successfully invade France, through Normandy.	October 18	Himmler publicly announces the German Volkssturm's creation in a radio address.
June 13	Germans launch first V-1 rocket attacks against Britain.	October 21	Aachen surrenders to American troops.
June 22	Soviet summer offensive, Operation <i>Bagration</i> , begins; it will ultimately destroy Army Group Center.	October 27–28	Volkssturm enrollment commences throughout Germany.
July	With D-Day completed, Allied strategic bombing efforts return to industrial and transportation targets.	November 10	First action by western Volkssturm troops, at Metz; battalion performs poorly.
July 20	Unsuccessful assassination attempt against Adolf Hitler.	November 12	Volkssturm oath-taking ceremonies held throughout the Reich.
July 21	Himmler appointed commander of the Replacement Army; General Heinz Guderian takes over at OKH, the German Army High Command.	November 24	Isselburg Levy I company begins intensive training.
July 25	American forces begin Operation <i>Cobra</i> , which will rupture the German Normandy front.	December 4	Heavy American attacks to break Saar River defense positions.
August 15	Allied forces invade southern France in Operation <i>Anvil</i> .	December 16	Beginning of German Ardennes Offensive (the Battle of the Bulge).
August 17	Red Army troops enter East Prussia near Fichtenhöhe.	December 27	German Ardennes advance reaches its furthest point, about 3 miles (5km) southeast of Dinant on the River Meuse.
August 23	Rumania surrenders.	1945	
August 25	Allied troops liberate Paris; Rumania declares war on Germany.	January 1	German Operation <i>Nordwind</i> strikes American forces in Lorraine.
September 3	Allied troops liberate Brussels.	January 12	Soviets launch massive winter offensive in Poland and East Prussia that will carry them to the Oder River.
September 4	Bulgaria surrenders.	January 14	Volkssturm Battalion 38/20 (later Field Battalion E or VI) mobilized for "Westfalenwall" security occupation duties.
September 6–8	Hitler approves the creation of Guderian's joint army-SA "Landsturm" militia for eastern Germany.	January 16	Allied forces eliminate German gains in the Ardennes.
September 8	First V-2 rocket attacks on England.	January 21	Operation <i>Nordwind</i> concludes unsuccessfully.
September 8–14	Bormann convinces Hitler to convert the Landsturm into a national Nazi Party-run militia called the "Volkswehr."	February 8–9	Operation <i>Veritable</i> begins, British-Canadian attack to clear northern Rhineland.
September 11	American forces enter German territory near the village of Keppeshausen.	February 18	Canadian troops reach the Rhine opposite Emmerich.
September 17	Beginning of Operation <i>Market Garden</i> , Allied airborne offensive to seize Dutch river crossings.	February 23	Operation <i>Grenade</i> begins, American offensive to clear central portion of Rhineland.
September 19	Finland signs armistice.	February 25	Battalion 38/20 has its initial six-week tour of duty extended indefinitely.
September 21	Volkswehr renamed "Volkssturm."	March 2	Battalion 38/20 transferred to defensive positions on the Rhine River near Dornick.
September 24	Red Army reaches Hungarian frontier.	March 7	Americans cross the Rhine via the captured Remagen Bridge.
September 25	Hitler issues the Führer Decree authorizing the creation of the German Volkssturm.	March 9	German 1st Parachute Army withdraws its last troops across the Rhine at Wesel.
September 26	Operation <i>Market Garden</i> ends with British failure to capture Rhine bridge at Arnhem.	March 22	Patton's 3rd Army crosses the Rhine at Oppenheim.
October 7	First Volkssturm units enter combat, at Memel.	March 23	Operation <i>Plunder</i> , Montgomery's Rhine
October 10	Soviet troops isolate German Army Group North in Courland.		

	crossing, begins; Battalion 38/20 comes under heavy bombardment.	April 30	Hitler commits suicide in his bunker in Berlin; Admiral Karl Dönitz appointed Führer.
March 25	Battalion 38/20 defends Praest in 6th Parachute Division's effort to contain British-Canadian crossing.	May 2	Berlin falls.
March 28	Troops of Canadian 9th Infantry Brigade overrun Battalion 38/20 in Dornick. Otto Dekker becomes a POW.	May 7	German General Alfred Jodl surrenders forces to Western Allies at SHAEF HQ in Rheims, France.
April 1	Ruhr encircled.	May 8	Germans surrender to Soviets.
April 16	Soviet offensive breaks the Oder River defenses.	May 9	Formal signature of surrender documents; World War II in Europe ends.
April 18	Over 300,000 German troops surrender in the Ruhr.	June	Western Allies begin releasing Volkssturm POWs to ease civilian labor shortages; by August 663,576 men have been sent home.
April 22	Soviet troops reach Berlin.		

THE VOLKSSTURM IS BORN

The disastrous summer of 1944 created a difficult dilemma for the Third Reich. Logical leaders might have sought peace negotiations, but Adolf Hitler and his regime viewed the war through National Socialist ideology. This was a *Volkskrieg* – a clash of peoples (or races) – in which the only options were victory or destruction. Negotiations might bring a temporary truce; but Germany's leaders did not contemplate pursuing a ceasefire. Hitler believed that approaching the Allies for terms from a point of weakness would only recreate for Germany the disastrous conditions of 1918 following the Treaty of Versailles. Thus the war had to continue.

The only viable military strategy for Nazi Germany was defensive, but Hitler and many of his lieutenants (particularly Bormann, Goebbels, and Himmler) envisioned a defense like the one that the Japanese were employing in the Pacific. Germany needed to resist Allied forces with intense fanaticism at every point possible and prevent the Allies from executing the kind of rapid advances they had made during the previous summer. This bitter, protracted stalemate would then begin to inflict increasing Allied casualties for little gain. Germany would carefully marshal its reserves for devastating counteroffensives (such as the Ardennes Offensive) and bring to bear its "miracle weapons" (e.g. the V-1, V-2, and new Type XXI submarines) against the enemy home front and supply lines. As the war dragged on, Hitler and company believed that Allied morale would eventually crumble and either the subhuman (in their view) Slavic Soviets or, as the Führer believed more likely, the degenerate Aryan race mixers in America would eventually beg for a truce if only the Germans would fight long and hard enough.

The key to implementing such a plan would be twofold. First, Germany needed additional troops. This obviously necessitated thoroughly scrutinizing the manpower categories given conscription deferrals. Men in jobs not deemed absolutely necessary, or whose jobs women or

BELOW A Volkssturm battalion medical officer (*Bataillonsarzt*, right; note the three-pip collar insignia with a small staff of Aesculapius) instructs an assistant. Their expressions and crouched poses suggest they are perhaps under fire or in a drill. (Courtesy of W. Darrin Weaver Collection)



older men could do, would be conscripted to fill the ranks of the new *Volksgrenadier* infantry divisions or to replenish depleted existing formations.

Even so large numbers of civilian German men would remain exempt due to their essential economic functions, health, or age. Many Wehrmacht and Party officials suggested creating a militia to tap this large pool of civilian German men. Some local officials, particularly in border regions like South Tirol or the Wartheland, had actually begun creating such militias. In August 1944, *Oberkommando des Heeres* (OKH, the German Army High Command) chief General Heinz Guderian – responsible for the replacement-starved Eastern Front – suggested that Hitler allow him to create a large-scale militia throughout eastern Germany. Guderian's militia would be army controlled, but would involve the paramilitary Sturmabteilung (SA) in organizational and training matters. Hitler initially rebuffed Guderian, but by September 6 had agreed to this army-SA militia, that was to be called the Landsturm.

The Nazi strategy's other critical demand was fanaticism. Indeed, Hitler believed that Germany would already have won the war had it not been for defeatism and low morale in the military. His proof for this notion came on July 20 when a small group of army officers, largely centered within the Replacement Army (the Wehrmacht's mobilization and training cadres inside Germany), attempted to assassinate Hitler as the beginning of a *coup d'état*. To create the fanatical defense of Germany that his strategy required, Hitler appointed Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler to command the Replacement Army and began a significant expansion of the National Socialist Leadership Officer (NSFO) program that sought to bring Nazi indoctrination to all soldiers.

In this vein, Martin Bormann, Hitler's personal secretary and head of the Nazi Party Chancellery, pointed out to Hitler that Guderian's militia would probably lack zeal. Bormann noted that for a militia to fight effectively, fanaticism would be even more essential than for regular soldiers. Thus, by mid-September, Hitler consented to let the Party through its *Gau*- and *Kreisleiters* (the top Party official in each *Gau* and *Kreis*) control the new militia, rechristened the German Volkssturm, and to make it nationwide so as to expose all German civilian men to the Nazi view of the stakes (i.e. Germany's survival) inherent in this war. With the Party controlling organizational issues, Himmler, as Replacement

Army Commander, was responsible for equipment and training. The very name "Volkssturm" (literally People's Storm) symbolized its critical psychological role – the militia was to unleash a storm of fury inherent in the threatened German nation. While Hitler issued a classified Führer Decree outlining the new militia on September 25, Himmler promulgated the Decree on October 18, the 130th anniversary of the victory over Napoleon at Leipzig.

Wednesday October 18 began for our composite character, Otto Dekker, with the normal routine of getting ready for work in his hometown of Isselburg. As he

read the newspaper over breakfast, Dekker was engrossed in the stories of German troops fighting in the vicinity of Gumbinnen, East Prussia, and around Aachen. Such tales evoked mixed feelings: he was proud of the heroic troops, but only a few months earlier the Wehrmacht was resisting the Bolshevik hordes in places with unpronounceable Slavic names and the Western Allies were still in Britain.

Dekker, now 47, had served during World War I alongside many of his German comrades, seeing extensive combat in 1916 at the Somme. A leg wound there had left him with a limp and had ensured his transferral to a rear area desk job in a supply unit for the remainder of the war. This clerical experience not only served him well in teaching him about military logistics, it also helped him land an office job at the Isselburger Holzwarenfabrik (IHF), in peacetime a producer of fine millwork, where he was now chief shipping and receiving clerk. He would have been assistant manager, but that was reserved for Oskar, factory owner Heinrich Ziegler's younger brother. Dekker felt proud of his military service and took equal pride in his contribution to Germany's current war effort: IHF made large quantities of crates, most recently for the new *Panzerfaust* anti-tank weapons.

Life in Isselburg, located close to the Dutch border, had changed significantly during the war. The first year brought considerable activity, but after the defeat of France things had settled down until 1943. In the wake of the Stalingrad defeat, IHF had lost most of its deferred German workers, who were replaced by foreign workers requiring close supervision. Dekker's reaction was mixed. A major defeat was never good, but at least it was hundreds of miles away. Mobilizing additional men was a necessary sacrifice, but he worried about his three nephews in the army. Dekker was thankful that he had only two teenage – and unmarried – daughters. While bringing in Ukrainians and other foreigners to work meant that IHF could continue its contribution to the war effort, Dekker feared what might happen if someday these crude young men were to happen upon his wife or daughters alone.

Mixed views about the war situation prevailed in Isselburg. Publicly most people still expressed nationalistic confidence that the war would be won; but in private a definite sense of trepidation was appearing, because the fighting was now frighteningly close. Just weeks earlier, Arnhem, less than 30 miles (50km) away, had been the scene of a major battle that thankfully the Wehrmacht had won. The air war was even more immediately threatening. Isselburgers had become accustomed to flights of heavy bombers heading for the cities of the Ruhr and beyond. They had even become used to the occasional plane crash or stray bombing as damaged planes jettisoned their loads; but the heavies had not targeted Isselburg directly. Since the summer, however, the *Jabos* (a slang term for *Jagdbombers* or fighter-bombers), were increasingly regular visitors who maliciously targeted everything in and around the town including individual vehicles, even horse carts. The rail line south of town had been heavily attacked as well. The war was clearly getting more personal – and dangerous – for Isselburgers by mid-October 1944.

This trend continued with Himmler's speech, broadcast live from East Prussia. Dekker expected the usual exhortations, but was astounded to hear Himmler's main point: the Nazi Party was creating a militia throughout the Reich and all German civilian men up to age 60 were

BELOW Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler broadcasting the Volkssturm's creation to the German nation. General Heinz Guderian, who initially suggested forming a militia, is on the left. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)



RIGHT The photo on the left shows the Nazi propaganda ideal of a confident, well-presented, and well-armed Volkssturm man (note his rifle still has a protective muzzle cap). The rather more grizzled man on the right with a much cruder-appearing rifle was more the reality. (Left: courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz; Right: courtesy of Imperial War Museum)



required to enroll. Dekker's wife Helga reacted with near panic and outrage that boys and old men would be called up when she regularly observed significant numbers of young soldiers engaged in rear area tasks. Dekker tried to reassure Helga that the militia would probably just take over such rear area duties or serve to help the police maintain order should the foreign workers get out of line. He also suggested that either his important war work at IHF or his limp might even keep him out of this new militia altogether.

Dekker was not nearly as calm as he tried to appear. Himmler had plainly said that this Volkssturm would contain *all* German civilian men aged 16 to 60. There were other ominous suggestions. Invoking the image of the Landsturm from the days of the War of Liberation against Napoleon was puzzling. Dekker's generation viewed the Landsturm as a patriotic horde armed with little more than farm implements. The Landwehr, a regular militia with muskets and uniforms, would have been a more obvious and comforting image. Himmler had said the force would be organized and equipped with "energy and improvisation." While the former might be good, the latter suggested that the militia would be armed and equipped with leftovers and scraps.

Most troubling was Himmler's comment that the new militia would ensure that the Allies would never have a secure rear area. Was he calling for a guerrilla struggle? The new militia's name implied fanatical partisans and Himmler even proclaimed that Volkssturm men would never surrender. The 1813 Landsturm was indeed viewed as a guerrilla force. Dekker could not help but think that if the Volkssturm were a gang of civilians armed with rag-tag weapons they could only hope to fight as partisans. And if they did, Volkssturm men had better not surrender for, as he knew from his days in the Kaiser's army, captured partisans were often summarily executed. Himmler might have hoped to generate a wave of enthusiasm; but in the Dekker household and many others across Germany he had done just the opposite.

OFF TO A BAD START, FALL 1944

The negative reactions to the Volkssturm's announcement expressed in the Dekker household on the evening of October 18 were widespread. To calm the public, Nazi leaders stressed that the force was a legal traditional militia, and thereby combatants under the Hague Regulations, not partisan guerrillas. Legality required not only that the Volkssturm fight in accordance with conventional military practices, but also that it have a regular chain of command with duly appointed officers responsible for the actions of their men, some type of clothing – preferably uniforms – or otherwise readily identifiable emblems to distinguish them from civilians, and regular military weaponry. Nazi leaders believed that using a traditional template for the force would calm public fears and encourage participation. As the force developed and its members became fully indoctrinated, it could later become a fanatical, politically (i.e. National Socialist) motivated people's militia which would unleash the storm of fury that Nazi zealots believed to be inherent in the "biologically superior" German nation, or *Volk*.

This dual task of military and psychological mobilization proved impossible. The Wehrmacht was the only entity with the skill, infrastructure, and expertise necessary to organize a traditional militia. Yet, Hitler and other Nazis believed the army lacked the proper spirit to turn average Germans into fanatical warriors, so motivational goals caused Hitler to charge the Nazi Party structure with organizing the new militia. Each *Gauleiter*, with the assistance of a Volkssturm chief of staff, would supervise his region's militia; but the real center of activity would be at the *Kreis* (local) level. Here the *Kreisleiter* and his Volkssturm chief of staff would enlist and classify personnel, organize units, procure equipment, supervise training, and attempt to generate the desired fanaticism.

Such a monumental task would require a good understanding of public morale, but also the ability to coordinate many groups and institutions. While many Nazis believed the Party excelled at such tasks, it was fragmented by internal institutional and personal rivalries. Indeed, Hitler fostered these in his Führer Decree by giving "organizational" control to Bormann and "military" control to Himmler. Bormann and Himmler and their respective Volkssturm chiefs of staff Wilhelm Friedrichs and Gottlob Berger clashed regularly with one another during the Volkssturm's early months. Others, including the German Labor Front's Dr Robert Ley, SA chief Wilhelm Schepmann, and Reich Minister for Armaments and War Production Albert Speer, also mounted significant bids to gain authority over the Volkssturm. While Bormann fended off these challengers, he did so by creating a centralized decision-making apparatus that sought to control even the tiniest of details. While such standardization helped ensure the Volkssturm's legal status – and Bormann's influence – it handicapped local improvisation, which was supposedly a beneficial hallmark of the force. It would also considerably dampen the enthusiasm of local Nazis for the new militia, particularly those in the affiliated organizations like the SA or the SS (Schutzstaffeln, the organization that was by now the dominant force in police affairs in Germany).

A second problem created by Nazi control of the Volkssturm was that the Party lacked the ability to build a traditional militia. Indeed, Nazi

efforts to provide inspirational and improvisational leadership typically disheartened Volkssturm members and confirmed fears that the new militia would be either militarily ineffective or treated by the Allies as an illegal partisan force. Thus public opinion created an ironic situation, for Nazis at least, in which Wehrmacht participation in the local Volkssturm improved morale while NSDAP (Nazi Party) efforts hurt it. Often, however, it took time for *Kreis*-level Volkssturm leaders to realize this, and the Volkssturm's first weeks of existence were therefore frustrating for everyone involved.

Even as Himmler delivered his speech, Party members throughout Germany began putting up posters – often black print on vivid red backgrounds – proclaiming the Volkssturm. Such posters attracted great interest but dispelled few doubts as they simply presented the Führer Decree verbatim. By the end of October, Party officials held enrollment meetings for all civilian males aged 16 to 60. Isselburg's was typical: several local SA men and HJ leaders sat at desks in the entrance hall of the town's *Rathaus* (town hall) recording each individual's name, date of birth, residence, telephone contact information, workplace, occupation (both learned and practiced), whether or not the man had a driver's license, and "other technical information." Otto Dekker and many of his compatriots had plenty of questions for the SA men at the enlistment meeting, but the common answer was "be patient, you will be notified about the next meeting." The whole episode did little to dispel the notion that the Party was unprepared for building the militia. Everyone knew the army's conscription apparatus and the police already had the information gathered at the meetings, so many questioned: why hold this meeting?

The only comforting news concerned the levy system under which Volkssturm men would be classified in four categories. Levy IV would contain men with physical conditions that limited their field worthiness; they would only perform rear area security duties. Levy III would include youngsters aged 16 to 20. Levy II was for men in essential occupations, who would only serve within their home *Kreis*. Levy I would contain men in less important occupations, who could serve anywhere within the *Gau*. Dekker was certain his limp would gain him Levy IV status; and, if not, his job at IHF would qualify him for Levy II.

Making levy assignments, a prerequisite for organizing units, generated considerable confusion for local officials in the fall of 1944. Bormann exploited this by sending out numerous directives precisely detailing the levy assignment process and rigidly insisting that units be based upon the members' place of residence. Bormann justified this on ideological grounds; if the Volkssturm was to be an expression of the German racial community (*Volksgemeinschaft*), units needed to reflect fully a town's or neighborhood's civilian male population. This would also preserve Party control and force

BELOW German men reading the Führer Decree announcing the German Volkssturm. Their apparently grim reaction was common. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)

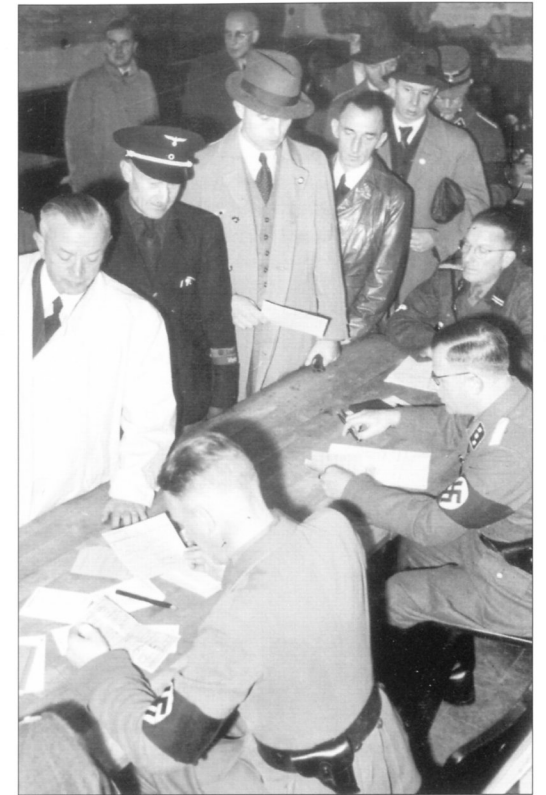


everyone to negotiate with Bormann for Levy II deferral quotas which would, in turn, significantly enhance his power.

By early November Party officials in Kreis Borken-Bocholt began making their levy assignments. Adhering to national guidelines, Isselburg's *Ortsgruppenleiter* kept Levy IV membership and health exemptions to an absolute minimum. Only those men who had been listed by the Army Reporting Office (*Wehrmeldeamt*) as "unfit for duty" could sign up for Levy IV physicals. Otto Dekker's draft status when he had aged out of the conscription pool was "fit for limited duty," so he was flatly refused permission to seek Levy IV status.

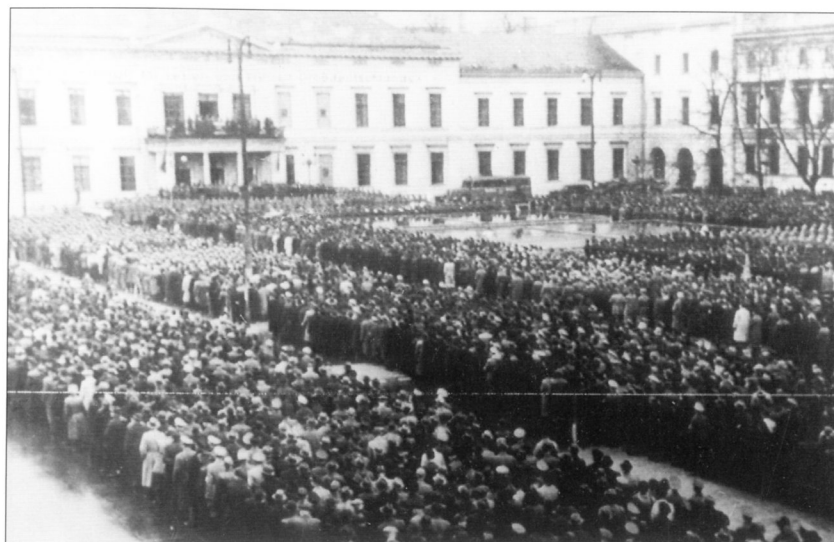
This disappointed Dekker and further diminished his confidence in the Party's ability to run the Volkssturm, but he remained convinced that his essential job at IHF, and its important war work, would guarantee him a Levy II assignment. In early November, Heinrich Ziegler, IHF's owner, called Dekker into his office to discuss levy assignments. The *Kreis*' leadership staff, or *Kreisleitung*, had ordered all factories to send a list of Volkssturm-liable employees complete with each man's draft classification, job status, and job importance classification. The *Kreisleitung* had returned the list and granted IHF the maximum deferral quota (70 percent) because of its participation in the *Panzerfaust* program, but that still meant three of the ten remaining German employees would be in Levy I. Ziegler had deferred the two skilled maintenance men who kept the machinery running – an increasingly difficult task given the lack of spare parts – plus the three master woodworkers who supervised the numerous foreign workers. That left him with two deferments. Ziegler, as factory manager, understandably took one. This left the 60-year-old janitor, a 51-year-old bombed-out refugee from Essen (who was barely trained), assistant manager Oskar Ziegler, and Dekker. Oskar Ziegler was not nearly as capable as Dekker, but was the owner's brother and just as importantly was an NSDAP *Blockleiter* and close friends with the *Ortsgruppenleiter*, which won him the final Z-Card (Levy II deferral card). So much for the Party propaganda that touted how the Volkssturm would reflect the *Volksgemeinschaft*'s ideal community where everyone was valued and respected for their "Germanness," and how it would be an equally shared burden for everyone regardless of rank, class, or Party membership. As Otto Dekker's experience illustrates, Party and personal connections and luck had more to do with one's levy assignment than did ideology or fairness.

To counter such initial negative impressions, Berlin ordered public oath-taking rallies for the Volkssturm for November 12. As it was a Sunday the rallies would not disrupt economic activity and they could be tied to the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch's anniversary on November 9. The festivities included parades, martial music, and inspiring speeches, and, as the climactic event, the gathered local Volkssturm men took the Volkssturm Oath. In it they swore their allegiance to defend the *Volk*, Führer, and Fatherland until the enemy was defeated or until their last breath. The



ABOVE Local Party and SA officials enrolling neighborhood men in the Volkssturm. Note the Wehrpass on the table in the lower left, indicating that the man in the light overcoat had prior military service. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)

RIGHT In major cities Volkssturm swearing-in ceremonies were quite large, as evidenced by this scene from the massive Berlin ceremony staged by Gauleiter – and Propaganda Ministry Chief – Dr Joseph Goebbels. (Courtesy of Imperial War Museum)



goal was to demonstrate the Volkssturm's organizational progress and to create an emotionally bonding experience for its members.

Isselburg's ceremony occurred under leaden skies with an intermittent cold drizzle. Volkssturm men from Isselburg as well as Anholt, Werth, and outlying villages gathered in ranks at the town square where a small Luftwaffe honor guard and the Hitler Youth fife and drum corps provided what pomp and ceremony could be mustered. The *Ortsgruppenleiter* read a rather standard Nazi propaganda speech extolling the glory of the German *Volk* and its Führer and condemning the spitefulness of Germany's enemies. After his experiences with the levy assignments, Dekker found these words hollow and uninspiring. On the other hand, actually taking the Volkssturm Oath heartened him somewhat, as he stood with his friends and neighbors swearing allegiance to protect their Fatherland. To a degree the ceremony awakened a proud nationalism that reminded him of his soldierly duty and how he had felt as a young man heading off to France in 1915. Dekker resolved to do his duty again for Germany.

For older western Volkssturm men the main motivation for service was traditional patriotism and sense of duty. German culture had long honored martial qualities and men were expected to serve their country willingly. Moreover, the culture encouraged a sense of community and conformity. Questioning duly constituted authority or challenging its orders was simply not the norm. Thus there was considerable cultural pressure on Volkssturm men dutifully to obey the call to arms. And what respectable small-town German man wanted to be seen as a coward, a shirker, or unpatriotic?

Yet, German culture also held that governmental authority should be used wisely for the national good. While a militia might be legitimately needed given the presence of invading forces on German territory, the loyal patriotism of the average German should not be abused. Fielding an unprepared militia would only result in senseless deaths, and even National Socialist ideology considered it criminal to waste precious German blood. Therefore, Germans expected that Volkssturm units would be organized, trained, armed, and equipped properly. Only this



LEFT This scene is typical of the more humble, somber, and sparse Volkssturm oath-taking ceremonies in smaller towns. Note that the uniformed man on the far right is taking his oath with the traditional two-fingered salute rather than the Nazi version. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)

would convince members and their families that their militia service could actually be meaningful. Otherwise men would not serve enthusiastically and might not serve at all. Thus for the Volkssturm to succeed as a motivational force, it had to become a credible military force first; initial NSDAP efforts largely failed in this.

Isselburg's Levy I company illustrates this mistake. Unit leaders were appointed quickly, but several initial choices proved incompetent, received deferrals or reassignments, and had to be replaced. Early training sessions consisted of little more than drills, marching, and propaganda. While some of this was necessitated by the desire for the Volkssturm to make a disciplined martial impression at the oath-taking ceremonies, most members attributed it to the local Party officials' lack of experience and preparedness. The only readily available weapons were whatever few firearms the Party, SA, HJ, or other affiliated groups possessed or what little local police or military installations could spare. Some units even solicited or requisitioned civilian firearms. None of these sources was adequate and ammunition was even scarcer. With only a handful of rifles, a few pistols, and even BB guns, marksmanship training would do little good beyond giving those men who had never fired a weapon some very rudimentary instruction. Many veterans, like Dekker, gained no benefit whatsoever and even felt insulted by this.

Likewise, initial Nazi indoctrination efforts backfired. Little of the material was new and rhetoric about resisting fanatically did not sit well with men who had realized that they would not be properly armed and would be expected to provide their own clothing for both training and active duty. Equipment shortages also exacerbated the common fear that Volkssturm men would be treated as partisans when captured. Training had to occur on Sundays given work schedules, but this was the only free time anyone had. While men might sacrifice for a worthy cause, the early Volkssturm training sessions seemed a waste of time and effort.

Moreover, Volkssturm men faced additional stress induced by their families' concerns about the new militia. Helga's opinion of the Volkssturm, common among many wives, was even more negative than her husband's. Seeing the men in civilian clothing for their oath

ceremony and training confirmed her suspicions that the force was improperly organized. Furthermore, newspaper reports about the deployment of East Prussian Volkssturm men against the Red Army's October offensive only continued the pattern of mixed messages. The stories of the valor and success of East Prussian Volkssturm men were heartening; but tales of Soviet atrocities against civilians and captured Volkssturm men heightened Helga's fears for both Dekker and herself and their daughters. Ultimately, both Dekker and Helga concluded that the Volkssturm should have been the Wehrmacht's responsibility.

The Volkssturm's first weeks of existence revealed that the Party had made few preparations for creating a militia and had little idea of how to improvise one. Given the scope of the militia, this flaw was obvious to the public and the Party only made things worse with its propaganda themes of fanatical resistance against all odds, fighting to the death, and supposed Allied atrocities and barbarism. The Volkssturm's initial appearances only confirmed Germany's desperate situation. For the average Volkssturm man, Nazi efforts to strengthen morale actually lessened it and only expanding the army's role in the militia offered any hope for turning it into a credible military force and thereby assuring the militiamen – and their families – of their status as legal combatants. Therefore, the key to the Volkssturm's success, either in its military role of mobilizing more troops or in its psychological role of helping motivate these new troops to fight, lay in heightening the part of the Wehrmacht and reducing that of the NSDAP.

FALL TRAINING

While public reaction to the Volkssturm in western Germany was largely negative, in localities where officials selected militarily experienced unit leaders and worked closely with local military units (the Replacement Army in rear areas or active forces in frontline border regions) on improving training, equipment, and clothing, morale improved somewhat by January 1945. All these matters were obviously tied to the



RIGHT Although the Party intended that public appearances by the Volkssturm would strengthen morale, assemblies where members wore civilian clothing or eclectic uniforms and were armed with outdated or foreign weapons tended to have the opposite effect. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)



militia's effectiveness, but they were also critical to members' confidence and to assuring Volkssturm men and their families of the militia's legal combatant status.

Uniforms were critical to morale. The Hague Regulations required that legal combatants wear either a uniform or a standardized insignia that would be identifiable from a distance. The initial plan for Volkssturm men to provide their own civilian clothing and to rely on an armband as the distinguishing insignia struck most Germans as insufficient. Moreover, by this stage of the war most men lacked much quality, weather-fast clothing and did not want to ruin what they had in training. Thus the public demanded that Volkssturm men receive proper military uniforms, but Germany had neither available stocks nor production capacity to clothe the millions of Volkssturm men.

Similarly, for Volkssturm men to believe they could fight effectively – and to ensure their combatant status – they needed reasonably modern military weapons. Yet Germany faced shortages of weapons and production capacity. In fact, the Wehrmacht reported shortfalls of 714,000 rifles, 58,000 machine-guns, and 3,000 mortars in September 1944. Reich Minister for Armaments and War Production Albert Speer admitted that arming the Volkssturm with new weapons would be impossible.

Simply put, Volkssturm success required Wehrmacht assistance, in spite of national Nazi leaders' reluctance to acknowledge this. Locally, where practical concerns were paramount, many Volkssturm officials sought military cooperation and support early and this paid dividends in the long run.

One critical area in which Volkssturm officials needed to put military concerns ahead of ideology was in unit commander selection. Positions did not carry rank but were simply designated as Squad Leader (*Gruppenführer*, for nine to ten men), Platoon Leader (*Zugführer*, commanding three squads), Company Leader (*Kompanieführer*, over three platoons), or Battalion Leader (*Bataillonsführer*, of three companies). Despite the standard structure, many units had four or five subunits because they were based on their members' place of residence, in accordance with Bormann's instructions. Moreover, unit rosters fluctuated constantly due to

ABOVE On the left is the propaganda image: Volkssturm members training with new German weapons (in this case the excellent MG42 machine-gun) under the guidance of a decorated veteran of the vaunted "Grossdeutschland" Division. On the right is a more typical scene: a World War I veteran in civilian clothing instructs his men in the operation of the World War I vintage MG08. (Left: courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz; Right: courtesy of Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Sammlung Hoffmann)

RIGHT **Volkssturm** men, mostly in civilian clothing, training with live hand grenades. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)



evacuations, reclassification of job priority, changing jobs, moving to a new residence, or health problems. Maintaining a stable – or even accurate – roster was a significant headache for local Volkssturm officials and unit commanders. Furthermore, unit leaders bore considerable responsibility for training their men. Plainly, there were many reasons for appointing competent unit leaders immediately.

The *Kreisleiter* and his chief of staff selected battalion commanders, who in turn chose their company leaders, who chose platoon leaders, who chose squad leaders. Reflecting the Volkssturm's dual purpose, national guidelines required that unit leaders be "convinced National Socialists" who were also "front proven leaders" familiar with modern weaponry. As many commanders had both Party membership and some military experience, it appears that these guidelines were generally followed. Militarily experienced leaders tended to be anxious to cooperate with the army on training and equipping their militia units. Towards this end, many newly appointed Volkssturm officers attended training sessions at military training camps during November.

Otto Dekker's Levy I battalion, designated 38/20 (Gau 38 Westphalia North's 20th Battalion) illustrates these trends. His Isselburg unit formed this battalion's 3rd Company along with companies from Liedern (1st), Suderwick (2nd) and Anholt (4th). Dekker's battalion leader was 52-year-old Reinhard Thiet, a former army captain with service in both World Wars, though combat experience only in the first war. Dekker's company leader, Johann Eiden, had earned an Iron Cross Second Class and a Wound Badge as a World War I platoon commander. Both men were SA members. Eiden knew Dekker from business dealings and invited him to serve in the company headquarters platoon because of his clerical skills. Eiden understood that he would need experienced help in the "*Papierkrieg*" (Paper War) that military bureaucracy demanded.

In late November battalion and company commanders completed their training courses and Battalion 38/20 began serious training in cooperation with local Replacement Army formations and commanders. Although Gau Westphalia North was not on the front lines like neighboring Gau Essen, Operation *Market Garden* had shown the need to develop a deep front to

thwart such airborne and armored offensives. With Isselburg only 6 miles (10km) from the Rhine bridge at Rees and Anholt only 9 miles (15km) from the bridge at Emmerich, readying Volkssturm units here to help secure the Issel River, the first natural obstacle east of the Rhine, was important to the Wehrmacht. Units deeper in Germany's interior would not have received as much help with their training.

Battalion 38/20's fall training regimen devoted considerable attention to marksmanship, but those men who demonstrated proficiency – including Dekker, owing to his World War I training and his Isselburg rifle club membership – received instruction in more advanced weapons including MP40 submachine-guns, stick and egg hand grenades, and the MG34 and 42 machine-guns. Dekker and other veterans were particularly impressed with the new MG42, whose rapid rate of fire created a constant sound, much like paper tearing, rather than the rhythmic hammering of the old MG08 from their war. In addition, it was much more maneuverable, being air rather than liquid cooled. With training time limited to evenings (when it was held indoors due to the early sunset) and Sundays, men were divided into groups and rotated through several stations in each session to maximize training exposure. Experienced Replacement Army trainers proved invaluable for the Volkssturm men, many of whom agreed that this kind of training and weaponry just might turn them into effective soldiers.

Volkssturm men found demonstrations of the *Panzerfaust*, a single shot rocket-propelled anti-tank weapon, even more impressive. There were three basic models, the oldest having a maximum range of about 33 yards (30m), an improved version with a range of about 66 yards (60m), and the latest model with a range of about 110 yards (100m). These weapons were quite portable – the newest models weighed about 13lb (6kg) – but their shaped-charge warheads could knock out even the most heavily armored tanks. Equally impressive and effective was the *Panzerschreck*, an 88mm rocket launcher effective up to a range of just under 220 yards (200m). The launcher was a tube weighing about 26lb (11kg), open on both ends (hence its nickname, *Ofenrohr* or stove pipe), into the rear of which a loader inserted a rocket, with the firer aiming the weapon and pulling an electric trigger to launch the rocket.

When fired, the *Panzerfaust* and *Panzerschreck* emitted a dangerous jet of smoke and flame from the launcher tube's rear that could inflict serious injury to anyone in its path. Moreover, the weapons' range required firers to hide until tanks were close, but launching the warhead often disclosed the user's position and invited fire. If the armor was accompanied by infantry, things would be much more difficult for the operator both before and after firing. Nonetheless, Dekker and his comrades found the



ABOVE **Clothing for training** was a major concern for Volkssturm men. These men were lucky enough to have been issued coveralls for their session at a Wehrmacht training center. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)

RIGHT A Volkssturm man has just fired a *Panzerfaust* in a training demonstration; note the backblast that made the weapon rather dangerous to operate. Although this was the Volkssturm's most readily available weapon, there were never enough to allow extensive practice in firing. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)



BELOW The attentive expressions of these Wiesbaden Volkssturm men illustrate that well-organized (i.e. army led) and relevant training – here with the *Panzerfaust* – not only improved Volkssturm capabilities but boosted morale as well. (Courtesy of HStA Wiesbaden, Nr. 3008/1235, Sammlung Foto Rudolph)



Panzerfaust and *Panzerschreck* encouraging weapons that could potentially equalize the odds between themselves and Allied armor.

Battalion 38/20's training also included map reading, target location and range estimation, terrain use and concealment, small unit tactics, field fortification (particularly roadblock) placement, construction, and defense, march order and discipline, weapon maintenance, aircraft recognition, and reaction to and defense against *Jabo* attack. By Christmas, Dekker and many of his comrades actually felt some pride in their accomplishments and believed that they had laid a foundation upon which they could, if given additional training and the proper weapons and equipment, develop into effective militiamen. Certainly, there had also been propaganda speeches and films, but Dekker and his comrades had not found them very inspiring; after all, they had heard the Nazi line for years. Their heightened morale resulted from legitimate military training, not indoctrination.

Under Battalion Leader Thiet's capable direction, and with active cooperation from local rear area commanders, the Isselburg company also began coordinated training with other Volkssturm and army units. On Monday, December 27, Dekker's company participated in a deployment drill testing their ability to occupy defensive positions (mainly roadblocks or observation and firing posts in buildings, slit-trenches, or rifle pits), an essential task for Volkssturm units engaged in local defense. To facilitate rapid initial deployment, each company established a 20–25-man *Alarm-Einsatztrupp* (Emergency Action Team). Dekker was not in this unit, but as a company headquarters clerk he was responsible for recording who reported and what weapons were issued. At the first drill, this required considerable imagination because the unit had only the eight World War I Mauser Gewehr 98s they had received for Sunday target practice.

Company Leader Eiden decided it best not to arm anyone for the drill so as to avoid giving away that even the unit's rapid deployment team was inadequately equipped.

On Saturday, January 6, Battalion 38/20 participated in another training exercise coordinated by Wehrkreis VI in Münster. At 8.15pm, they deployed for a large-scale drill postulating an Allied armored breakthrough across the Rhine at Duisberg and Wesel. Isselburg's company deployed to hold strongpoints located at roadblocks on the town's main roads. Dekker's role was to report immediately to the company headquarters in the Isselburg *Volksschule* (primary school – it was a common Volkssturm practice to set up headquarters in such schools) in order to record personnel reporting and weapons distribution. Then he would take up his own weapon and prepare to defend the company headquarters. Manning the school's telephone would also be critical, as the civilian telephone network was the Volkssturm's only means of communication (which explains why another common headquarters location was in post offices housing the local telephone exchange). Should enemy tanks actually appear in Isselburg, it would be up to the Volkssturm company headquarters to alert by phone or courier nearby towns like Anholt or Bocholt just as troops, police, or Volkssturm men in Hamminkeln or Haldern had, it was hoped, done for Isselburg. Such was the grandly titled *Panzerwarndienst* (the Armored Warning Service), a system of designated lookouts in each town, created to give some advance notice to the rear area defenses in Germany. Without this imperfect system Volkssturm units would be blind and would probably be overrun before they could even deploy.

Although Levy I units like Battalion 38/20 spent considerably more time training than other Volkssturm formations, Levy II units were active, primarily constructing roadblocks under the direction of Replacement Army engineers. Roadblocks generally consisted of large logs placed vertically into holes dug in pairs to a depth of 3ft (1m) or more and spaced about 1½ ft (0.5m) apart in the roadbed and shoulder. A pair of such supports would be placed on each side of the roadway,



LEFT Volkssturm men practice river-crossing skills, apparently somewhat clumsily, as part of a reconnaissance mission training exercise. Few Volkssturm units had such specialized training, though once activated they were often expected to perform such tasks. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)

with two further pairs about one-quarter of the road's width from each shoulder. Additional logs were placed horizontally between the vertical supports. This enabled traffic to pass until units were alerted to close the road by blocking the center section with additional logs. Placement of such positions was critical as they had to be located where enemy forces could not simply bypass them. Moreover, to maximize their effectiveness they needed to be where enemy forces could not see them from a distance. Hence they were often situated in defiles, behind overpasses, just around bends in the road, or between buildings. Concealed defensive positions at such blocks were essential so that men with a *Panzerfaust*, grenades, or other anti-tank or explosive weapons could get a good shot at vehicles halting at the obstacle. Of course, setting up a fire plan to deal with accompanying enemy infantry was also important. While no single, or even group of, roadblocks would be enough to stop an enemy breakthrough, the Volkssturm's purpose was to ensure that Allied forces would have to deploy and fight at virtually every village or town in Germany, thus denying them the ability to make deep, rapid advances.

Although Volkssturm morale improved due to training, nagging doubts remained. Militiamen had to return the helmets, weapons, and coveralls that army training teams provided for some training exercises. Moreover, Volkssturm men were unable to do much live firing, particularly of the more modern weapons. The entire Isselburg company had been allotted only two *Panzerfaust* 30s and four *Panzerschreck* rounds to fire at their handmade wooden target. While better than nothing, such limited practice gave no one a sense of proficiency with these new powerful and fearsome weapons. Even rifle ammunition had been extremely limited, with some men firing only a handful of live rounds. Lastly, the unit's own arsenal remained pitifully weak. While Battalion 38/20 was better trained than many units, the enthusiasm of the men was dampened by the fact that they still lacked basic equipment.

Yet, doubts aside, German morale had improved significantly by early January 1945. The weather had created a respite in Allied air attacks and most importantly the Ardennes Offensive had shown that the Wehrmacht was still powerful. Whilst many Germans could see that the newspapers had stopped talking about the impressive gains trumpeted prior to Christmas,

reports remained considerably more optimistic than the previous summer's. Discussion of another German offensive in Lorraine (Operation *Nordwind*) also generated considerable interest. And although the Volkssturm might not be ready to fight just yet, Otto Dekker and his compatriots could rightfully claim that their unit had made amazing progress in just a few weeks. Given six months, they might actually be ready to defend Isselburg should the need arise. But the hope was that the Wehrmacht's apparently renewed strength would ensure that this circumstance remained hypothetical.

BELOW As comrades continue work on their rear area town's roadblock, a Volkssturm anti-tank team wearing civilian attire prepares to practice defensive tactics. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)



MANNING THE "WESTFALENWALL"

In mid-January, Nazi Germany's situation worsened considerably. On January 12, the Soviets ruptured the German eastern front in a drive that would carry them to the Oder River. On January 16, the Western Allies erased the bulge created by the German Ardennes Offensive and soon afterward forced the Germans to abandon Operation *Nordwind* in Lorraine. With their strategic reserves having been expended, the Wehrmacht relied more than ever on the Volkssturm for labor and for local defense – the militia's intended role – and to substitute for trained infantry both in the rear and at the front. Otto Dekker's Battalion 38/20 was part of this trend, as it mobilized in early 1945 for active duty to construct and secure the "Westfalenwall," a rear area defense position.

Battalion 38/20's mobilization orders came on January 14. The unit, now christened Field Battalion VI (though also called Battalion "Thiet"), formed a security occupation force in the so-called "Westfalenwall." The Westfalenwall was intended as a fall back position for containing any potential Allied crossing of the Lower Rhine, though in January it was little more than a line on a map. Largely from experiences in the east, the Wehrmacht had learned that even weak Allied forces could unhinge a substantial defensive line if they breached it before retreating troops could occupy it. Thus Volkssturm Levy I units mobilized to man the Westfalenwall even though Gau Westphalia North had not yet been invaded. This shows that military logic could supersede Nazi restrictions on the Volkssturm.

Volkssturm units on the Westfalenwall security occupation duty spent time not only in training, but also in constructing field fortifications. Army engineers assisted them, but typically by supervising not laboring. Otto and his mobilized Levy I comrades were not alone, however; local Volkssturm men from all levies were employed on this duty. Indeed Volkssturm men were sent from all over Gau Westphalia North to work on the Westfalenwall. Such mobilizations generated significant complaint, from both the men and their employers. Moreover, using Levy II men for labor tacitly admitted that they could not be armed so there was little point in training them.



LEFT A Christmas celebration in a Volkssturm unit's cellar headquarters suggests the improved morale of Volkssturm men by late December. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)

RIGHT **Volkssturm** men cut and haul tree trunks for a typical rural roadblock. The vertical supports are already in place and additional logs will be inserted horizontally to block the roadway. Army engineers and a Party official supervise. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)



The “wall” was actually a series of strongpoints along the Issel River. Positions consisted mainly of roadblocks and supporting defensive positions (rifle pits, machine-gun or mortar emplacements, and slit-trenches) located to protect towns, bridges, and road junctions. There were few larger emplacements for artillery as little heavy support was anticipated. Extensive anti-tank ditches characteristic of the large defensive positions in the east were not necessary here due to this area’s numerous drainage ditches and watercourses. While this reduced the amount of digging required, the Westfalenwall’s Volkssturm laborers still had plenty of exhausting, heavy work to do largely by hand. Moreover, the cold, damp winter weather hardly made such heavy labor more pleasant, particularly for those men who had to provide their own clothing and were not returning to their homes each evening. Also snow removal was a regular and tiring task. As a result, morale was not high, but the men felt that they were doing their duty as good Germans and considered their labor to be useful and productive.

Compared to the Volkssturm laborers, the men of Battalion 38/20 had some advantages. Because they were on active duty the Party had provided



RIGHT Typical **Volkssturm** firing pit as part of a town’s defenses. It has a good field of observation (though with little cover) for a *Panzerfaust* operator and the rifleman who provides covering fire against infantry. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)

uniforms – or, more correctly, a collection of uniform parts. Most men had some type of uniform overcoat (a real blessing in the winter cold), tunic/field blouse, and pants, with Luftwaffe or older army items being most common. Some had tan shirts and/or pants (of various origins – many from various Party-affiliated groups such as the SA or Reich Labor Service). Everyone in Dekker’s 3rd Company had M43 field caps, though some of the other units had older forage caps. In addition, 3rd Company had a stock of gray-painted *Luftschutz* (air raid defense) helmets (sometimes referred to as “gladiator” style) for use in combat. Footwear was a very mixed bag of old-style boots, lace-up half-boots (*Schnurschuhen*, often of Italian origin), and civilian workboots. Shirts, underwear, and socks were mainly whatever the men provided for themselves, though government-issued items had been promised. Overall, the units presented a rather motley image as they were outfitted with whatever was available in their locality. Indeed about the time the battalion had been activated for duty, the Party had proclaimed the “*Volksopfer*” (People’s Sacrifice) clothing drive to urge donations of spare uniform parts and equipment from average citizens so as to clothe more Volkssturm units.

The men of the Anholt and Isselburg companies had an advantage over their comrades because their active duty posts were in their hometowns. This made it easier for them to acquire needed items and occasionally to visit their families while off duty. The need to maintain nocturnal security watches at the roadblocks, in observation posts, and at command posts (which meant Dekker had to sleep in the *Volkschule* several nights a week to man the phone) restricted this somewhat. Discipline, however, was not harsh, and so long as men fulfilled their required duties a strict system of passes was not implemented. Dekker even found time to handle some IHF work. Herr Ziegler had agreed to pay Dekker half salary as long as his mobilization did not last more than three weeks (which it did: Dekker’s stipend ended in early February) and the factory continued to run as fully as earlier. This was very generous, as many of Dekker’s comrades, particularly those from Leiden or Suderwick, had to make do on the official Volkssturm pay rate of one mark a day. Local Levy II men received no pay at all for their labor because they were not officially mobilized. Dekker felt some sympathy for the out-of-towners, but had more than a little *Schadenfreude* towards his fellow Isselburgers who were in Levy II. Now they were paying for those Z-Cards they had been so glad to get last fall.



ABOVE In January 1945, the Nazis launched the *Volksopfer* (People’s Sacrifice) to encourage civilians to donate spare military clothing and equipment to help provide uniforms for all Volkssturm men. Here, Berlin Party officials sort through the results. (Courtesy of Imperial War Museum)

BELOW Two Volkssturm men take advantage of having active duty in their hometown by heading home briefly while off duty. Note that while both wear M36 overcoats (epaulettes removed), the man on the right has a Luftwaffe forage cap while his comrade wears the army version. (Courtesy of W. Darrin Weaver Collection)





ABOVE Urban Volkssturm men construct a roadblock at a railway overpass in Berlin. These men employ metal beams for the vertical supports, heavy boards as the horizontal walls, and readily available rubble between the walls. Note that the center remains open to traffic. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)

Panzerfaust operators would have a clear shot at a stationary enemy vehicle that had suddenly halted when it unexpectedly encountered the obstacle. This was not always possible, so it was important to have machine-guns to provide maximum covering fire against any approaching infantry. Unfortunately, the battalion lacked sufficient machine-guns so the focus was on trying to ensure that riflemen could provide this covering fire. Of course, given the lack of rifles and ammunition this was not a confidence-inspiring situation, though the men's performance in going through the motions – if not the actual firing – of defending their positions was deemed adequate. Once again, the militiamen's behavior was correct even if their mood was not ideal.

Battalion 38/20 also made tactical preparations to oppose an Allied airborne landing, a possibility that complicated the Westfalenwall's defense considerably. While enemy ground forces would likely attack from the west, airborne troops could come from any, and probably more than one, direction, which necessitated strongpoints all around towns with road junctions. Moreover, it meant that the Volkssturm battalion could not simply occupy their defenses and wait for the Allies to come to them, but would have to actively patrol to keep roads secure and open. Dekker's company had not only to defend Isselburg but also to secure – with foot patrols since the unit lacked vehicles – the roads to Anholt (a distance of nearly 2 miles, or 3km) and on to Suderwick (a further 3 miles, or 5km). A January 27 drill showed just how taxing this could be, and, in response, Battalion Leader Thiet decided to expand the Jäger Company from two platoons to three. This would take some of the fittest men from each company, who could serve as a mobile reserve; Thiet hoped to procure motorized transport, but until he could they would be bicycle mounted.

With a higher priority for weapons due to its active duty status, the battalion's arsenal had improved by the end of February. Virtually everyone had a rifle, though many were captured foreign models with rather limited ammunition stocks. Also there were enough *Panzerfäuste* on hand for Battalion Leader Thiet to urge caution in their handling. Support weapon availability had improved dramatically as each company now had some light machine-guns, mainly MG81s, aircraft weapons converted for ground use. Also the battalion had shifted the 1st and 2nd companies' mortars and all men trained in using these weapons into a single battalion support battery. While this as well as the

Jäger Company violated both the standard Table of Organization and Equipment and Bormann's orders establishing place of residence as the basis for all units, local officials deemed improving military capability more important. Certainly, Battalion 38/20 was now considerably better armed, but largely with the odds and ends that could be scrounged together from a variety of sources. Extensive combat was beyond the unit's capability given the limited stocks of foreign ammunition and varied types of weapons; but commanders hoped that any security occupation/local defense combat would be brief and the battalion quickly relieved by regular field army troops.

Regulations stipulated that Volkssturm units on active duty serve under the command and logistical supervision of the field army; however, the Westfalenwall was not yet a combat zone. That meant the position was under Replacement Army supervision, but Volkssturm units continued under NSDAP – i.e. Westphalia North Gauleiter Alfred Meyer's – command. This meant the Volkssturm units' logistical arrangements were unpredictable because, although the Replacement Army had food service personnel and equipment at fixed installations, it lacked the field army's extensive field kitchen or bakery equipment; the NSDAP or Volkssturm possessed neither. While the field battalions received some food from the army, it tended to be canned or packaged and not freshly prepared meals or bread. Local Party entities, such as the National Socialist People's Welfare or the National Socialist Women's Organization, occasionally provided hot food. Nonetheless, Otto Dekker spent a good bit of time in the company headquarters attempting to arrange for food services for his company. Being stationed near their hometown greatly facilitated this as Isselburg citizens and business owners charitably helped provision their Volkssturm men. But for those men stationed further from home, locating and preparing food could be a problem. One of the other field battalions was even instructed by its *Kreisleiter* to equip its own field kitchen by scavenging for usable utensils in bombed out buildings. As a last resort, off-duty Volkssturm men used their ration coupons to buy food. Having to beg, borrow, and scavenge for basic sustenance certainly did not enhance a *Volkssturmmann's* fighting spirit or confidence.

As work on the Westfalenwall progressed, the Volkssturm guards and laborers faced threats that were greater than exhausting work and construction accidents. In clear weather, Allied air power made itself known more and more regularly, particularly after Canadian and British forces launched Operation *Veritable* on February 8. Previously, the dreaded *Jabos* had largely only been a nuisance that forced Volkssturm

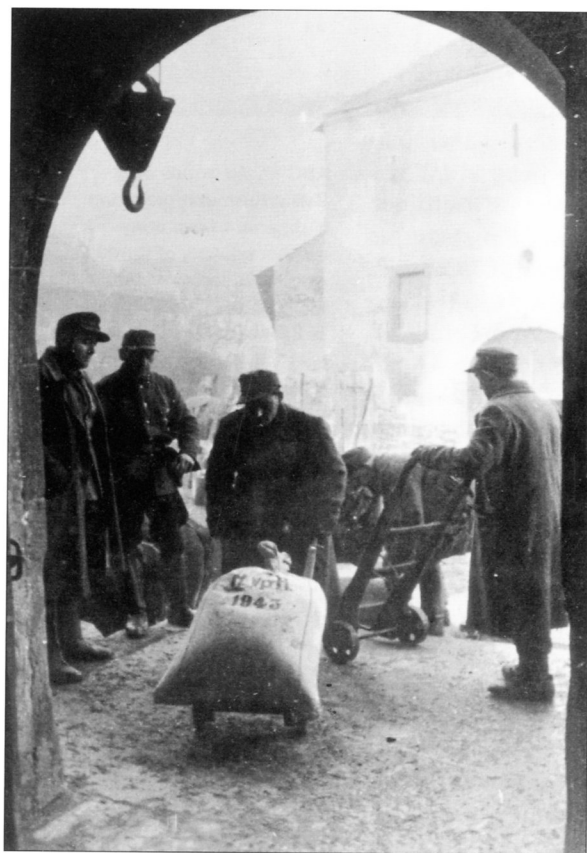


ABOVE An active duty Volkssturm unit receiving a shipment from army quartermasters of Kar98k rifles and crates of *Panzerfäuste*. Most units lacked weapons until activated, a fact that significantly hurt Volkssturm training efforts. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)

RIGHT Victualling was a major challenge for Volkssturm units. Note that while these men, probably on labor duty, are getting a warm meal, they must eat it from a variety of self-provided containers. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)



BELOW Volkssturm men evacuating sacks of grain. Labor duties were often a significant part of an active Volkssturm man's day, and many Levy II units were used exclusively as labor due to weapons shortages. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)



men to do extra work to ensure that their paths through the winter snow to their strongpoints were not visible from the air. But with increasing air attacks in February, Volkssturm men had to help clear damage, evacuate usable goods from damaged buildings, fight fires, and help maintain security (even guarding stranded trains against looting). Most unpleasantly, Allied *Jabos* seemed to delight in strafing work parties, adding considerable danger to a situation that had previously been merely unpleasant. Battalion Leader Thiet even ordered the unit's light machine-guns to engage low-flying aircraft; but he cautioned that only a very limited amount of ammunition could be expended on anti-aircraft fire. Thus, during February, the Westfalenwall's Volkssturm entered combat, though against an enemy that it was really unprepared to face.

Also in February, the men of Battalion 38/20 began to anticipate returning to civilian life. Normal Volkssturm tours of duty lasted for six weeks and theirs was scheduled to end on February 25. One week prior to that date, Thiet received orders from Gauleiter Meyer extending their service indefinitely. Most Volkssturm men, and their families, were willing to sacrifice for the good of Germany; but only if they felt the sacrifice was meaningful and the burden shared evenly. Too often, though, the Volkssturm burden fell unequally and morale consequently suffered. Nonetheless, Meyer's decision was not arbitrary; the seven field battalions were the best Volkssturm units in the *Gau* and as of February 18 – the date of Meyer's extension orders – Canadian troops had reached the Rhine across from Emmerich, less than 12 miles (20km) from the Westfalenwall. Understandably, Meyer did not want to weaken his *Gau's* defenses.

The regulation fixing tours of duty at six weeks was a Party effort to soothe concerns about Volkssturm service, but in this case was militarily impractical. Logic, however, did not cheer the men of the Levy I field battalions. Nonetheless, they grudgingly continued to perform their duty. Indeed, their tasks significantly grew in number owing to the need to double security watches in late February because of the increased likelihood of enemy attack.

By March 1, Battalion 38/20 had improved significantly as a combat force capable of defending its prepared positions, the main task initially conceived for Volkssturm units. Had weak reconnaissance probes or lightly armed airborne forces assaulted the Westfalenwall, the field battalions had sufficient training and firepower to force those units to stop and deploy, which could delay the Allied advance long enough for regular units to relieve them and form a defensive front. The problem was that regular Wehrmacht units were in such short supply and such a weakened condition that it was highly unlikely that such relief would come. In fact, as the battalion soon discovered, the Wehrmacht increasingly depended upon Volkssturm units to fight as regular infantry battalions.

COMBAT ON THE NIEDERRHEIN

By early March 1945, Battalion 38/20's capabilities had increased considerably; indeed it was probably among the best Volkssturm units in western Germany. It was trained and equipped sufficiently to perform the militia's basic tasks until regular troops could relieve it, i.e. it could defend fixed positions against reconnaissance teams and locate and pin down lightly armed paratrooper patrols. But on March 2, 1945, Battalion 38/20 – along with several other Gau Westphalia North Volkssturm battalions – became a regular infantry battalion in a frontline combat division defending the Rhine River. This was common in 1945, but it placed Volkssturm men in a nearly impossible situation for which they were extremely unprepared. However, lacking infantry replacements, the German Wehrmacht had no other option.



LEFT Volkssturm unit leaders man an observation post in the open Niederrhein terrain. (Courtesy of W. Darrin Weaver Collection)

Battalion 38/20's deployment into neighboring Gau Essen violated Volkssturm regulations restricting units to their home Gau; but Westphalia North's Gauleiter Meyer authorized the exception on grounds of military necessity. Army Group H was badly depleted from combat west of the Rhine so Meyer promised 15,000 Volkssturm men to help hold the river. Though Battalion 38/20 moved only a few miles west from the Westfalenwall, it entered a different world – that of a frontline combat infantry unit.

Battalion 38/20 assumed a nearly 3-mile (5km) sector at the far right of the 6th Parachute Division's front; indeed the battalion was the far right of the entire 1st Parachute Army. The position extended along the Rhine from near Emmerich, around the village of Dornick, and on to the sluice on the Altrhein. Although active duty Volkssturm units typically served as a unit attached to a regular command, Battalion 38/20 and several other Volkssturm units became an integral part of a regular unit. In 38/20's case, they replaced the 18th Parachute Regiment's shattered 1st Battalion. The Volkssturm unit was officially renamed Battalion "Rückriem" for its new commander, Hans Rückriem, another veteran officer, on March 7. Why Gauleiter Meyer replaced Thiet was not clear, but such changes typically occurred to bring in a more militarily capable officer, or to relieve someone due to health or employment priority concerns – or perhaps this move was to reassign Thiet to supervise further preparations at the Westfalenwall. Whatever the reason, Rückriem soon proved himself very capable.

The 6th Parachute Division made considerable efforts to assist its Volkssturm units. About 30 1st Battalion veterans remained with Rückriem's unit to help train, supervise, and reinforce it. A medical officer was assigned to inspect and improve Volkssturm medical arrangements. The divisional staff quickly integrated Volkssturm battalions into the bureaucratic routine by requiring daily reports on unit strength and activity, air and ground observations, logistical matters (particularly weapons and ammunition, but including animals and fodder), casualties, and field works construction. Volkssturm units also had to maintain exact

personnel records, disburse and keep records on pay, and ensure that all members had identity disks and updated paybooks. Many, including Dekker, used the gray army paybooks issued to them during earlier military service. Men without previous service received brown-covered booklets from the *Gau* office stamped with the words *Deutscher Volkssturm*. Both pocket-sized paybook versions included a photo, personal information, and the man's military record, though the army versions were more detailed and extensive. Identity disks were zinc or aluminum ovals divided by a perforation in the middle with the battalion and company numbers and the company roster number assigned the Volkssturm man (thus Dekker's number was 38/20/3/19) stamped on each half of the disk.

Proper operation of a modern military force requires such record keeping, but winning the *Papierkrieg* was yet another challenge for overburdened Volkssturm unit commanders and their small staffs.

BELOW A platoon leader fights the *Papierkrieg* at his open-air desk. Record keeping was essential, but burdensome for Volkssturm units' small and under-equipped staffs. (Courtesy of W. Darrin Weaver Collection)



The only factors working in favor of these headquarters personnel were the parent unit's cooperative attitude and prior experience. Fortunately for 3rd Company, Company Leader Eiden was a former officer and had the wisdom to select men like Otto Dekker with prior military and civilian clerical experience for his staff.

As in rear area security occupations, an active Volkssturm unit on the front lines spent much of its time constructing defensive positions. In contrast to its Westfalenwall experience, Battalion 38/20 now concentrated on building observation posts, machine-gun nests, rifle pits, and trenches as part of a series of strongpoints in open terrain rather than towns. They also built bunkers in which to shelter during barrages or to rest. Typically they situated weapons positions (particularly for machine-guns) with maximum fields of fire and good lines of sight, but this had to be balanced with camouflage and concealment. They often took advantage of the dykes along the river to form the main line of resistance. Positions were typically small, accommodating no more than about six men and often fewer. The unit even received mines to cover approaches to and areas between their strongpoints. Engineers from the regiment or division supervised everything to maximize effectiveness, ensure positions were mutually supportive of one another, and facilitate coordination with adjacent units.

Battalion 38/20's defensive plan was typical for German units in 1945. Units largely engaged in observation until the Allies launched their attack. With the enemy's opening barrage, Volkssturm commanders down to the platoon level could request artillery support, but only on clearly observable targets because the Germans lacked artillery and ammunition for a general counterbarrage. The battalion's own organic heavy support (four medium mortars of the Jäger Company) could fire up to 20 rounds per tube during the barrage phase and then up to ten rounds per tube during the actual crossing. This represented a quarter of the unit's entire mortar ammunition, so again fire was restricted to visually identifiable targets. Rückriem also instructed his machine-guns to engage Allied forces early in the crossing operation.

Unit firepower was limited. Each company had only four or five machine-guns and none had ample ammunition. Moreover, having 13 MG81s, one



ABOVE A Volkssturm work party takes a break from fortification construction near the front lines (note that the man in the center rear carries a rifle). The men are all attired in Luftwaffe uniforms but wear civilian shirts underneath and sport a varied array of tools. (Courtesy of W. Darrin Weaver Collection)



LEFT An MG42 in a typical, though rather exposed, defensive position on a riverbank. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)

MG15 (both aircraft machine-gun types adapted for ground use), eight MG42s, and two French light machine-guns made maintenance and logistics challenging. Beyond these weapons each company had around 100 men with 65 to 99 rifles, a couple of outdated anti-tank rifles, five rifle grenade dischargers, 175 handgrenades, and 40 *Panzerfäuste*.

The rifles reflected the typically eclectic nature of Volkssturm unit arsenals, though Battalion 38/20 was almost certainly among the best armed in western Germany. 1st Company had 34 standard German (and Czech-manufactured) Mauser Kar98k 7.92mm rifles with just under 150 rounds per weapon, plus 31 Austrian Steyr 7.92mm rifles with only about 35 rounds per weapon. 2nd Company had only one type of rifle, Italian 6.5mm Mannlichers, and averaged only about 28 rounds per weapon. 3rd Company – Dekker's unit – had ten Czech Mausers (100 rounds each) and 60 Dutch 6.5mm Geweer 95 rifles (167 rounds each). 4th Company had mainly standard issue German carbines but had ten Italian 6.5mm rifles with only seven rounds each. Jäger Company had 67 Kar98k carbines with 75 rounds each. Plainly, there had been an effort to minimize logistical problems by concentrating weapon types within companies and by providing each unit with some modern MG42s and *Panzerfäuste*. Nonetheless, Battalion 38/20 had four different types each of machine-guns and rifles and some of the weapons (i.e. those not of German manufacture) would become useless once initial ammunition stocks were exhausted.

Battalion 38/20 could not prevent an Allied Rhine crossing; nevertheless it might contain an Allied bridgehead, but only by counterattacking the initial landing forces, a common German tactic by 1945. Therefore, Rückriem held 1st and 2nd companies in reserve near Praest and Vrsasselt, and stationed Jäger Company, with the mortars and a mobile (bicycle-mounted) anti-tank platoon, in the center around Dornick so it could provide support anywhere on the battalion's front. Other reserves would have to come from the 6th Parachute Division or higher echelon commands. To carry out this mission, one for which neither Battalion 38/20 nor any other Volkssturm unit had been prepared, Rückriem stressed training in counterattack tactics during March 1945.

Nocturnal reconnaissance missions formed another new assignment for frontline Volkssturm units. This necessitated Battalion 38/20 patrols crossing the Rhine and moving as far westward as Bylerward, nearly 2 miles (3km) beyond the river, though they had minimal reconnaissance – and no river-crossing – training. This assignment clearly indicates that the army expected the militia to perform as regular combat infantry.

If frontline Volkssturm troops were not training or constructing defensive positions, they were typically manning their defenses. Between one-quarter and one-half of unit personnel kept watch at any given time of day or night. Certainly, they had experienced this at the Westfalenwall, but on the Rhine they faced the constant possibility of hostile action. Any activity could bring Allied shelling, sniper fire, or air attack. Indeed air observation duty grew significantly in importance. Off-duty time was non-existent except for resting. When awake, Volkssturm men were training, working on fortifications or other installations, or performing maintenance, logistical, or food preparation tasks. No longer could they go home to check on their families or eat dinner or look in on their

Volkssturmmann Otto Dekker in Dornick, March 1945



Volkssturm oath-taking ceremony

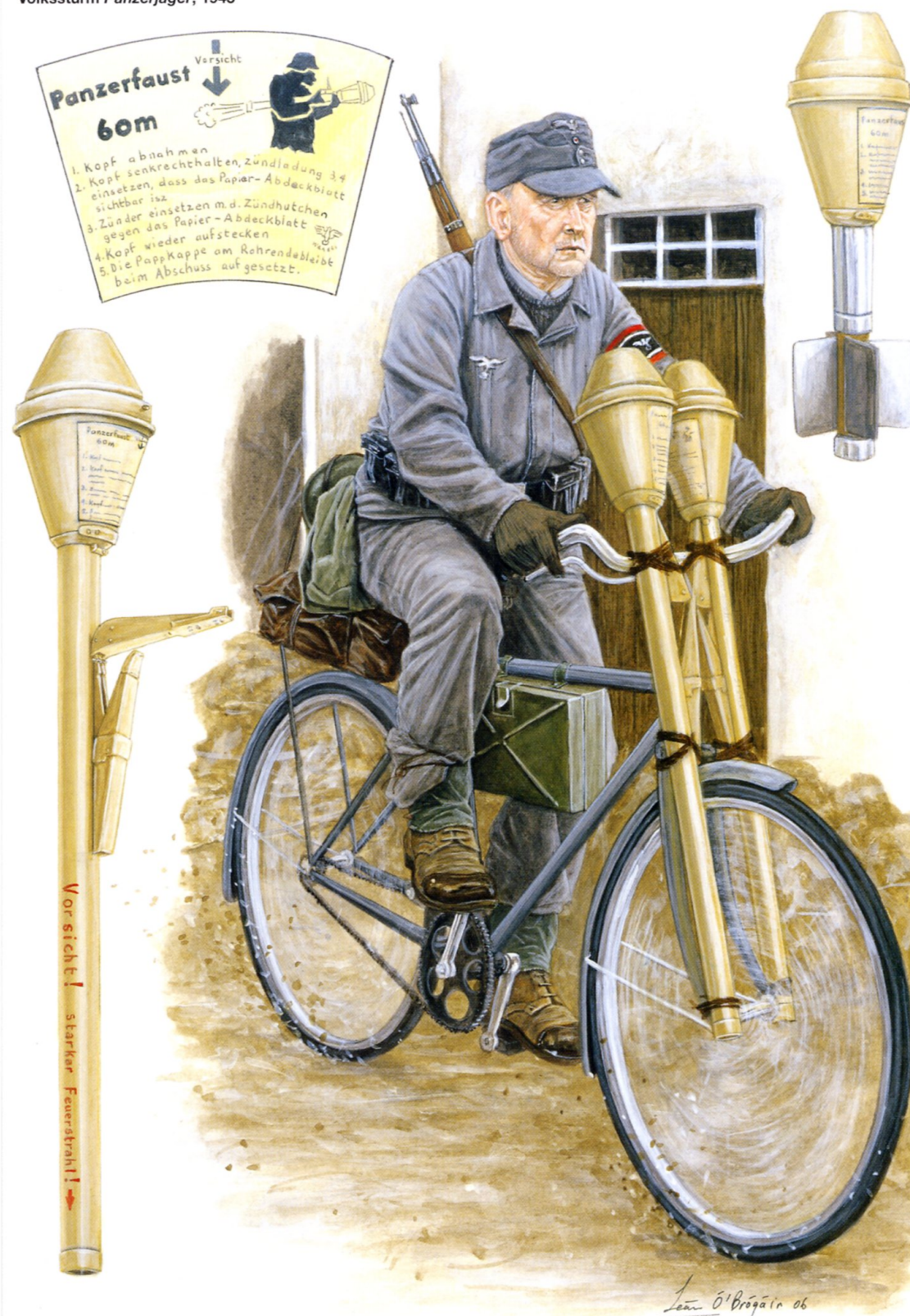
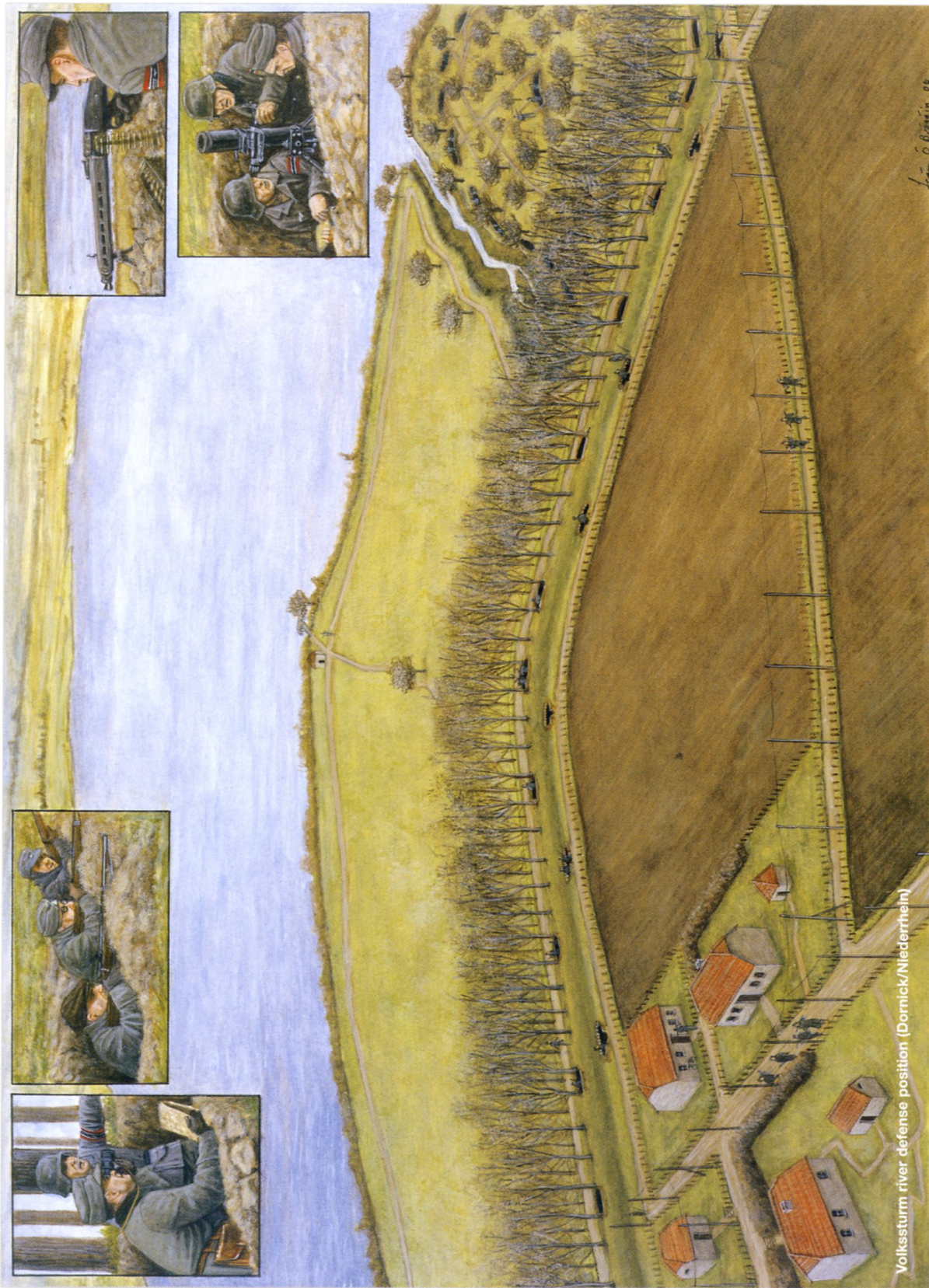


B



Volkssturm squad defense of a roadblock (Isselburg)

C



Volkssturmmann surrendering



F



Total Mobilization propaganda poster

G



Volkssturm propaganda poster

places of civilian employment while off duty. Clearly frontline deployment increased the stress levels of the elderly men of Battalion 38/20.

Logistically, active Volkssturm units depended upon the parent Wehrmacht formation's cooperation. While regular German units had mess kits, equipped field kitchens and bakeries, and staffs trained in logistical issues, Volkssturm units lacked all this. Some were even reduced to scavenging for kitchen and eating utensils. Battalion 38/20, however, benefited from its previous active service and the cooperation of 6th Parachute Division and was adequately supplied. Rückriem's men received rations comparable to those of regular troops. Each man was given 18–25oz (500–700g) bread, 1–1½oz (25–40g) spread (fat) and honey, and ½–1oz (13–25g) sugar daily. Weekly rations included 22–25oz (620–700g) meat, 2–3oz (50–75g) *Bratlingspulver* (cooking powder), and ½ oz (13g) cooking fat. Indicative of the battalion's integration into the regular military logistical system was the requirement that units send animals to the divisional butcher for slaughtering rather than doing it themselves.

In terms of discipline, the Wehrmacht treated Volkssturm men as regular soldiers. Orders mandated harsh punishments for desertion, loss of weapons, or dereliction of duty; they could even be interpreted as *Wehrkraftersetz* (Undermining the War Effort), a capital offense. Military police patrols behind the front operated under orders to arrest anyone suspected of leaving his post without orders. Flying courts martial and local Nazi Party officials could also mete out harsh punishment, including death (often by hanging) to deserters. Being under the supervision of veteran regular officers brought advantages for Volkssturm men, but it also meant that they had little option but to follow orders or risk such punishments.

From the preliminary attacks on March 22, General Bernard Montgomery's Operation *Plunder*, the expected Rhine crossing, put Battalion 38/20's preparations and will to the test of fire. On the 22nd, Allied airpower hit the battalion's rear areas at Praest on the main Emmerich–Wesel rail line. Ironically, both Anholt and Isselburg were also heavily bombed that day. The Allied goal was to disrupt German rail and road traffic and communication, but it had a collateral effect. Although Battalion 38/20's reserve companies near Praest took few casualties, these air attacks shook their morale because they were virtually defenseless against them.

After dark on March 22–23, the second step of the British-Canadian assault began with a heavy, phased artillery barrage. The brunt of this fell on Rees and Wesel (6 miles (10km) and 15 miles



ABOVE A machine-gun team cleans its MG34 machine-gun. Weapons maintenance was yet another challenge for poorly trained and equipped Volkssturm troops. (Courtesy of W. Darrin Weaver Collection)



BELOW Active duty Volkssturm troops prepare a meal of packaged army rations. (Courtesy of W. Darrin Weaver Collection)



ABOVE As with many soldiers, Volkssturm men found that adopted pets, like this dog, helped reduce boredom and loneliness. (Courtesy of W. Darrin Weaver Collection)

BELOW This Volkssturm platoon leader has properly emplaced his command post bunker on the reverse slope of a ridge to shelter it from enemy fire. (Courtesy of W. Darrin Weaver Collection)



(25km) upstream respectively from 38/20's positions) with approximately 750 artillery pieces firing for nearly 3 hours against German artillery positions. Almost 100 of these guns focused exclusively on suspected German mortar positions right up until British forces began the crossing itself. All available tanks and other firepower conducted a 2-hour "pepper pot" barrage against the Rhine's east bank immediately before the crossing; in addition to this there was an intense, 20-minute 500-gun barrage. Supporting all this action was a heavy smoke concentration on all German observation posts.

Against these attacks, Otto Dekker's battalion, holding the front immediately downstream from the main crossings, could do little but take cover, wait, and hope. Unit leaders' requests for artillery

support depended on telephone lines that were mostly severed in the air and artillery bombardment. Lacking phone connection, Volkssturm units depended upon couriers on motorcycle, bicycle, horse, or foot, but even if couriers arrived safely, there was little assistance to provide. The few German field batteries were fully engaged and heavily targeted by the Allies. The same situation held for flak batteries but they were mainly direct-fire weapons whose ability to locate targets was severely restricted by Allied countermeasures. Mortars were the Germans' best weapon, but these again required guidance and communication from frontline observers. And as with all German fire support, the Allies intelligently used their quantitative advantages to cripple the Germans' defenses. Indeed reports suggest that the Germans mounted no meaningful response to the massive barrage and initial crossing.

In all likelihood, the Volkssturm men of Battalion 38/20 simply hunkered down in cellars or bunkers. For those, like Otto Dekker, who had served in World War I, the night of March 22–23, 1945 probably reminded them of days nearly three decades earlier in trenches and bunkers in France. Certainly, the situation was essentially the same. One had to overcome the instinct to flee and simply remain under cover. For those lacking combat experience, their minimal training would not have prepared them to perform their duties under fire. In all likelihood, virtually every man in Battalion 38/20 spent most of this baptism of fire either cowering under cover or seeking, should the opportunity arise, better cover. Indeed had the barrage been less intense, many Volkssturm men would probably have fled their posts altogether.

The preliminary barrage ensured that the initial British crossing on March 23 met almost no opposition. Some 30 Volkssturm men from another of II Parachute Corps' battalions, shocked and confused by the barrage, surrendered almost immediately; but German resistance stiffened in the area north of Rees. Here the oxbow lakes of the Grietherorter Altrhein, the Alter Rhein, and the Millinger Meer confined the routes of advance. German paratroops fought bitterly for Speldrop and Bienen, villages in the narrow necks of land between these old channels of the Rhine. Battalion 38/20's sector was immediately to the north of this area with the unit holding positions in the immediate rear at Praest and on the Rhine flank at Grietherbusch.

For Battalion 38/20, the morning of March 23 began with relief that they were still alive. The realization that Allied troops (British and Canadians) had breached the Rhine near their positions quickly tempered this. For these Volkssturm men, the initial tasks were simply to assess their situation, locate their comrades, and, for unit leaders, to ascertain what the unit should do next. Dekker's 3rd Company, on the far right downstream from Dornick, had been spared the worst of the barrage. All platoons reported that casualties were light but several men were missing and presumed deserted, and the remainder were badly shaken. Confusion reigned at the command post as it had lost phone connections, so Company Leader Eiden, who would remain at the headquarters, ordered Company Adjutant Hofer to report to Rückriem while sending Dekker out to establish connection with neighboring Jäger Company. Dekker wanted to protest that his limp made him an inefficient courier, but Eiden typically dismissed him with the words, "Otto, I can trust you to come back." That personal comment was enough to send Dekker on his mission.

Making his way towards Jäger Company, Dekker realized something even more demoralizing than the fact that he was headed towards the battle. The morning sky was filled with wave after wave of planes, some towing gliders, heading east by southeast. It was Operation *Varsity*, the massive Allied airborne assault launched in support of the Rhine crossing. There was absolutely no Luftwaffe interference and flak opposition was minimal. Otto Dekker, wearing a civil defense helmet, clad in an old army overcoat and Luftwaffe tunic and pants with Italian boots and his own civilian socks and underwear, wondered just what good using his Dutch rifle (which had been designed before he was born) against this modern foe would actually accomplish.

Yet he continued on his assigned task. Certainly he thought about simply deserting and hiding, claiming that he had lost his way, until the Allies showed up. But what if a patrol from the division or corps found him first? Rückriem had issued orders – Dekker had filed them himself – stressing that the men of the battalion were subject to military discipline, and dereliction of duty was a capital offense. The experienced parachute officers were strict and would, at best, simply order stragglers to join and fight with the nearest unit. So Dekker's options, like those of other Volkssturm soldiers, were either to follow orders and hope for the best, or to desert and risk trying to get out of this on his own. The former meant he would at least have comrades, the latter made him a target for everyone. Moreover there was his unit. The men were from his hometown and he did not want to leave them in the



ABOVE For most Volkssturm units in combat, communications took place in face-to-face meetings – such as this one – because radios were almost never available. The civilian telephone network was their only other communication tool. (Courtesy of W. Darrin Weaver Collection)

lurch, nor did he want to sully his otherwise good reputation back in Isselburg. Such motivations were hardly those touted in propaganda, but he resolved to do his duty. Nonetheless, he told himself that the call of duty did not go so far as to require a man to die for no good purpose.

On arriving at Jäger Company's command post, Dekker was briefed on the situation by Company Leader Schwertfeger. His company – comprising the best-trained, fittest men in the battalion – had suffered more under the bombardment. The mortar battery reported several casualties, the MG42 post had taken a

direct hit, and he was uncertain about the status of two of his remaining three machine-gun posts. During the briefing, Schwertfeger received a breathless courier from Rückriem with orders for the anti-tank platoon to move to Praest in support of the paratroopers holding to the south in Bienen. Schwertfeger hastily dismissed Dekker to request that Eiden shift south and east along the Grietherorter Altrhein to relieve the Jäger Company as it moved towards Praest. As Dekker departed, he could see the grandly named anti-tank platoon forming up. There were perhaps 30 men on bicycles onto which a *Panzerfaust* was strapped to either side of the front forks. Dekker was suddenly thankful for the wound that had given him a limp and made him a clerk.

Dekker's return trip was relatively uneventful but episodes of seeking cover from intermittent shelling made it unpleasant. Dekker noted that while he could no longer – as he had done in 1916 – accurately gauge the impact point of a shell from its sound, having been previously under hostile fire was some benefit. Nonetheless, he felt that this war, while quite different, was still terrifying and unnerving.

Upon returning to Eiden's command post, Dekker found little had changed. Confusion and tension reigned; the men were largely exhausted though few had fired a meaningful shot. Aside from gathering information, little had been accomplished. Bienen and Speldrop were clearly the focus of intense fighting (with the 6th Parachute and reserves from the 15th Panzergrenadier divisions heavily engaged) and the sounds of battle – and, after dark, flashes and flares – further depressed the Volkssturm men's spirits. A few succumbed to their fears and attempted to desert in the direction of Emmerich, but that meant risking being shot by a jumpy sentry or arrested by military police. For most of the Volkssturm men, the sensible act was to stay with their unit and wait and hope.

On March 24, as the battle for Bienen raged, Battalion 38/20 increasingly shifted troops towards Praest, as a fall back position along Reichstrasse 8, the main Rees–Emmerich road. To support this shift away from the Rhine, 3rd Company extended its positions south to include Dornick. Morale remained low, but adequate, and the few casualties were evacuated to the regular aid station at Vrasselt. Missing in action had risen to nearly a quarter of total strength, but Eiden and the platoon leaders thought that most had not deserted, but were simply under cover away from their posts. No rations arrived from the regiment, but locally stored combat rations would suffice; during the

unit's long stint of active duty, it had grown accustomed to making do with whatever food it had. For Otto Dekker and his comrades, emotions swung quickly from one extreme to the other. The 23rd was a time of intense and terrible excitement and confusion, with the 24th being a rather mundane day of waiting and gnawing anticipation coupled with hope that maybe they had weathered the worst of the storm.

March 25 dashed these hopes as the Canadian 9th Brigade finally overcame Bienen's defenders. Moreover, additional Canadian troops opened a secondary advance towards Grietherbusch, meaning that well-equipped combined arms forces were heading towards Battalion 38/20 from two directions, neither of which Rückriem's men were prepared to face. Instead of a positional defense on the river, the battalion would have to react quickly to a fluid situation and redeploy as if it were a regular infantry battalion.

The first step in this came with an order from Rückriem instructing 3rd Company to send a platoon to Praest. Eiden dispatched his reserve, Wilhelm Herter's 2nd Platoon, for this task. Next Eiden received instructions from battalion headquarters ordering a counterattack by 4th and Jäger companies against "a small number" of enemy troops in Grietherbusch. Both orders meant that only the three platoons of 3rd Company remained unengaged. The sounds of battle from these areas were intense. Artillery (almost exclusively British and Canadian), mortar, and machine-gun fire was joined by the sound of tanks. Activity around Grietherbusch was definitely less, and, though observation was difficult, it was clear that the counterattack of 4th and Jäger companies had not succeeded. How could it? The men lacked any real support (the mortar section's remaining tube fired its last rounds during the morning) and had only practiced offensive tactics a few times. In all likelihood Allied fire pinned down the Volkssturm men as soon as they were spotted.

Otto Dekker experienced this personally on the 26th. While Dekker relayed orders to Fritz Ackermann, platoon leader of 3rd Platoon, in an observation post on the Grietherorter Altrhein, the unit's MG81 fired on an enemy patrol. Dekker and Ackermann briefly joined in with their



LEFT A platoon leader discussing the combat fire plan for a squad leader's MG81, an aircraft model adapted for ground use. The majority of Battalion 38/20's machine-guns were this model. (Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv Koblenz)

Dutch rifles. The Canadians immediately went for cover and withdrew. The confidence this “victory” generated was short-lived for, within minutes, mortar rounds bracketed the Volkssturm positions and knocked out the machine-gun, killing two of its crew and wounding the others. Such was the situation faced by Western Front Volkssturm men in 1945; not surprisingly most of them simply remained under cover.

By dusk on March 27, 3rd Company’s situation had become extremely tense. The sounds of battle from the southeast had diminished, indicating weakening German resistance. The unit was low on rations. Ominously, there had been no word from battalion headquarters since the 25th and couriers sent there had not returned. Eiden, Schwertfeger, and Serafin (4th Company commander) estimated that the Allies had probably taken Bienen and maybe Praest, and now would be pushing towards Emmerich. They discussed pulling back towards Emmerich or staying in position. They decided to stay put – and risk being cut off – because they had no orders to withdraw and because they doubted that their units could make an effective withdrawal under fire. They agreed to send out additional couriers to locate a headquarters unit, or perhaps a field kitchen or bakery.

The night of the 27th was considerably quieter than previous ones; some men found the quiet a welcome chance to catch some sleep. Others used the calm to scavenge for food, though not venturing far from known shelter. A few simply wandered off and deserted, although most remained at their posts, not so much out of a sense of duty as simply because they felt staying put was safer.

An intense mortar and artillery barrage shattered the relative calm at the 3rd Company command post before dawn on March 28. The shells were aimed at the general area, but many of the tired, hungry, and stressed Volkssturm men thought each round was directed at him personally. Once again, the only option was to take cover and hope. The barrage was brief but was followed by the sound of small-arms fire from the east and northeast. Included was the unmistakable sound of an MG42, and the only one in the battalion left in action was with the 4th Company just outside Praest. Eiden seemed completely overwhelmed and Dekker knew why. 3rd Company remained facing west on the Rhine and south at Dornick while Jäger and 4th companies were arrayed along the oxbow lakes facing south. The Canadians had outflanked their positions. Lacking any reserves, the only hope was for 4th Company to delay the Canadians until couriers could contact individual platoons to order an improvised pivoting into new positions at Dornick. Everyone in the command post knew that the Canadians would observe the men moving out of their positions and launch a torrent of firepower, but no other option existed.

Just as Eiden was selecting couriers, Albert Haak, who had been upstairs observing, burst into the cellar command post shouting “Enemy moving this way!” As Eiden continued his instructions, Dekker, Haak, and two other men headed upstairs. Indeed a reconnaissance patrol was moving along the edge of a path leading into Dornick from the north. The four Volkssturm men, all World War I veterans, fired off a few rounds and the patrol ducked under cover.

Just as Company Leader Eiden entered the upstairs observation post there was the unmistakable “plop” of a *Panzerfaust* firing, probably from

the 1st Platoon command post on the Praest road at Dornick’s eastern edge. Immediately afterward came the warhead’s expected detonation, then machine-gun fire and a loud rushing sound accompanied by a bright orange flame and the smell of burning gasoline. The Canadians were using flamethrowing tanks! Eiden, Dekker, and the rest of the men in the post could see the effect the flamethrower had produced. No one had been directly hit, but the men in 1st Platoon’s command post dropped their weapons and surrendered immediately. Given the situation, outmatched and outflanked, there was little choice for the Volkssturm men except to surrender. Eiden simply said “It’s over.” 3rd Company’s headquarters platoon dropped their weapons and filed outside, carefully taking out paybooks in advance, as per official procedure, to hold up so that their captors might not mistake efforts to produce identification as an attempt to draw a concealed weapon. Yet, that was small comfort since the men would have to step out into the street and trust the Canadians would look before shooting. Surely enough, as Eiden led the men out into Dornick’s street, the Canadian infantry loosed a few shots from their Enfields. The Volkssturm men typically replied with mixed calls of “*Kamerad*” and pidgin English “No shoot.” For the men of 3rd Company, Volkssturm Battalion 38/20, the war was over. Otto Dekker reckoned that he had fired maybe a dozen rounds; more than all but a handful of other men in the company.

This company’s fate was typical of many Volkssturm units that became frontline infantry in the war’s closing phase. Careful Wehrmacht attention and assistance enabled them to perform basic duties, but they were at best static infantry. Once combat began they might hold a position, but they were very exposed if flanked, taken in the rear, or forced out of their defensive plan. Also they were, as with regular German units, grossly outmatched by Allied firepower. Faced with overwhelming firepower, almost all they could do was to take cover. Volkssturm units were virtually without communications equipment, other than the civilian telephone network that was obviously very vulnerable. Lacking contact with higher commands, Volkssturm units were virtually blind on the battlefield and reliant on couriers as a means to communicate and gather information. Without communication the units could at best only stick to prearranged plans that, as illustrated by the 3rd Company’s experience, were often rendered meaningless by changing battlefield circumstances. Even if well intentioned and willing to do their duty, individual soldiers are only meaningful on the battlefield if they are properly coordinated and directed. Training and experience can overcome some of the handicaps



ABOVE Canadian combat troops bringing in German prisoners in northwestern Germany. (Courtesy of Canadian Library and Archives)



ABOVE Canadian soldiers search German POWs, the first step in processing prisoners. (Courtesy of Canadian Library and Archives)

imposed by lack of communications, instruction, and information, but the Volkssturm lacked these as well. So, Volkssturm units deployed as frontline infantry were often in an impossible situation from the start. An honorable surrender was about the best that individual Volkssturm men could hope to achieve.

A PRISONER OF WAR

Otto Dekker's surrender was a little ironic, although he was unaware of it at the time. Had his unit remained at the Westfalenwall it would have come under attack at around the same time as it did in Dornick. Moreover, had he been assigned to Levy II he would have been called out to defend Isselburg on

March 28 against the advancing British. In any case his combat performance would have been similar (i.e. perhaps firing a few rounds, but having no real impact on operations), but his personal fate would have been very different. Had he been assigned to a Levy II unit he would probably have been at home within a matter of hours or days. Instead, because their unit was serving as regular soldiers under Wehrmacht command, Dekker and his colleagues were processed as prisoners of war. In fall 1944, Germans had demanded assurances of the Volkssturm's status as legal combatants; those assurances now required Otto Dekker to become a prisoner of war.

Dekker's Canadian captors' first action was to search their prisoners for weapons, paying careful attention to pockets. The Canadian squad leader recognized Eiden's collar patch as that of a unit leader and ordered his men to devote more attention to this otherwise unremarkable group of Volkssturm men. They also searched the company headquarters, obviously in hopes of landing a trove of maps and other documents useful for military intelligence. They found little as Volkssturm companies, even those like Eiden's that were well integrated into their Wehrmacht parent unit, rarely received much significant information. Moreover, Eiden had received no written orders for over 48 hours. There was little of even tactical value and the Canadians had orders to keep moving, so the initial screening ended rapidly and the new prisoners were simply gathered in a cellar.

Waiting in the cellar was tense for the Volkssturm men. Nazi propaganda had featured stories of the mistreatment – even execution – of prisoners by Allied troops. The stories did not seem credible, but uncertainty bred anxiety. Eiden did ease things by commenting that it was better to be captured by Brits (unaware that their captors were actually Canadian) than by Russian or French soldiers.



LEFT A rather motley group of Volkssturm prisoners in Bocholt await further orders from their British captors. The date is March 28, 1945, the day Otto Dekker surrendered in Dornick. (Courtesy of Imperial War Museum)

Within an hour the Canadian guards roused the 3rd Company captives out of their cellar, hastily searched them again, and moved them to a house on the Praest road on the edge of town. There everyone except Eiden was sent into the cellar where they joined some men from 4th and Jäger companies. After an hour or so, a 4th Company platoon leader was taken up. After still more time passed, Dekker was ushered upstairs into a room with two Canadians, a guard and a young lieutenant who politely requested, in passable German, Dekker's identification. The lieutenant surprised Dekker by commenting on his World War I service record and adding that his own father had been an artilleryman in the Great War. Even more surprising was the officer's question about Dekker's limp and whether he required medical attention. The officer then asked a mix of questions, many of which addressed Dekker's well-being (e.g. had he eaten recently?). Dekker could not help but think that this was a pretty relaxed interrogation; he had more intense discussions than this with customers back at the factory. Dekker felt confused as the Canadian knew more about his unit than he himself did and he worried that the lieutenant's relaxed manner was a trick to get him to divulge information. Dekker chose his words carefully and even refused to answer some questions, and he felt certain he had not given out any valuable information. He never realized that the lieutenant already knew that the 3rd Company men simply did not have much useful intelligence to divulge.

After the interrogation, the Canadians deposited their prisoners in a fenced garden behind the building, where they received packaged biscuits and water. A medic, through his interpreter, asked if anyone needed medical assistance. The medic noticed Dekker's limp and the interpreter ordered Dekker to go back to the house. There the medic examined

BELOW Field interrogation of German POWs by a Canadian officer. Tactical intelligence became outdated quickly, so it was essential to interrogate prisoners soon after their capture. (Courtesy of Canadian Library and Archives)





ABOVE The Allies utilized whatever securable space was available as initial collection points for newly taken German POWs – here a bomb crater in Wesel. (Courtesy of Imperial War Museum)

Dekker's leg and asked if he could manage short marches. Satisfied with the positive response and the physical examination, he dispatched Dekker back to the garden.

While waiting for further instructions, the Volkssturm POWs expressed relief at the kind treatment by their captors. Some worried that the politeness would end unless the captives divulged some useful information; but others countered that the Canadians understood that low-ranking soldiers like them only knew information about their own unit's positions, and the Canadians had already overrun those.

The conversation ended abruptly as guards ordered the men onto the Dornick–Praest road. Soon a larger group of POWs consisting mostly of battalion colleagues plus a handful of regulars from other unfamiliar units joined

them. Canadian Provost Corps (military police) men conducted thorough searches of each prisoner. Dekker knew that individual captors sometimes took advantage of these to engage in personal souvenir hunting or to enrich themselves by taking personal items like watches or wedding bands. There was none of that, in part owing to the professionalism of the Canadians and in part because Volkssturm men had very little to offer in the way of attractive souvenirs.

Once satisfied that the Germans were disarmed, the Canadians lined the men up two abreast and marched them off towards the southeast. As the motley little column set off from Dornick, Dekker noted that his march out of town was considerably less burdened, both literally and figuratively, than his march in, a few weeks earlier.

The Canadians shepherded their prisoners first to Grietherbusch, where they collected additional prisoners, including some wounded.



RIGHT Canadian troops moving German POWs to a transit point in the Niederrhein area in late March. (Courtesy of Canadian Library and Archives)

Moving out again towards Rees, the prisoners could see evidence, including human remains, of the heavy fighting that had occurred in the area. Nearing Rees there was another graphic reminder of Allied power: massive columns of trucks and equipment streaming across pontoon bridges spanning the Rhine. Dekker was thankful that his unit had been stationed on the fringes of the heaviest fighting; but he also realized how hopeless Germany's situation must be if it had to rely on over-age men with captured rifles to try to stop an army like this.

The POW column ended its march in a field just outside Rees where Company Leader Eiden and other officers were separated from the enlisted men. There were no buildings and only a rather flimsy barbed wire fence so this was plainly a collection point for transit to more permanent camps. At the other end of the field Dekker and his colleagues could see earlier arrivals clambering onto empty supply trucks and heading off in the direction of the Rhine bridges. There were plenty of supply trucks moving forward to feed the Allied advance and it made sense to load them with the growing number of POWs for the return trip.

Otto Dekker's turn came soon. As he crossed the Rhine on the British pontoon bridge, he and his Volkssturm colleagues expressed awe at the ingenuity and might of the Allied forces. The truck ride westward ended somewhere beyond Kalkar (the last town they recognized) at a camp with more substantial fencing and tent facilities, suggesting that this might be the prisoners' final destination. After unloading, the men went through a series of stations where British soldiers performed security searches and bureaucratic tasks like recording information from the prisoners' paybooks. Some stations involved hygiene, such as the one where the prisoners were sprayed with a powdery delousing agent, and others involved the prisoners' personal well-being as they received woolen blankets, packaged biscuits, and medical attention. Each action reminded the Germans both that they had been defeated and that the British would treat them properly.

Camp housing was in large ten-man tents. Dekker's tent included himself, five Battalion 38/20 comrades, three very young flak gunners, and a paratrooper. The tents had no flooring – only some straw, which was adequate until rain, mud, and traffic took their toll. Food was reasonable, initially even enjoyable for the Volkssturm men who had had little besides bread since before the Allied barrage began. Canned corned beef, sometimes derisively called "old man," seemed luxurious for men who had eaten no meat in days. There was little for the POWs to do, but even this was a welcome relief from the intense stress of combat, particularly for the Volkssturm men. Dekker learned that his unit's 1st and 2nd companies had seen heavy fighting between Bienen and Praest, a fact that he found ironic. He had worried about his company



BELOW A German prisoner working for his British captors sprays a newly arrived POW with delousing powder, an important sanitation measure. (Courtesy of Imperial War Museum)

RIGHT Two Volkssturm POWs; the one on the right seems plainly relieved to be safely out of combat. (Courtesy of Imperial War Museum)



drawing frontline duty on the Rhine, but that had prevented him from being in the reserve companies who took heavier casualties.

Though relieved that he had come through combat unscathed, Dekker was concerned about how much longer his family would have to make do without him. And would they know that he was alive and uninjured? His experiences had convinced him that Germany would lose the war, but how much longer would it last? Dekker had received only one letter from Helga during his three weeks on the Rhine, though her news had been supplemented by information from his fellow Isselburgers, and none of it was comforting. Helga had mentioned extensive Allied air activity though she had assured him that she and the girls were fine. Moreover, newly arriving POWs brought only general information that indeed the fighting had spread to Isselburg and well beyond. Whatever the war could do to the Dekker family, it had probably already done, but Dekker and Helga and the girls had no way of knowing exactly what had happened to each other. In the camp, Dekker had plenty of time to worry about this situation.

During Otto Dekker's two-week stay at this temporary camp, it became quite crowded due to the steady stream of arriving POWs. The temporary nature of the camp's accommodation became apparent to everyone, German inmates and British guards alike. Thus, in late April, Dekker and his tent mates were shipped out to more permanent British POW camps, this time in Belgium. The trip, made again in standard supply trucks, was uncomfortable but not unbearable as the spring weather was pleasant and they made several brief stops in other temporary camps. Though Dekker and his truckmates were unaware of it, they were part of a substantial westward movement of German prisoners. Ultimately, over 400,000 German POWs, the overwhelming majority captured after D-Day, ended up in Britain itself with many passing through camps in Belgium. Otto Dekker was destined for POW Camp 2228 near Overijsje, southeast of Brussels.

Overijsje, newly constructed at the time of Dekker's arrival, was actually several (ultimately 20) compounds, each separated from the



LEFT An incoming prisoner receives his issue of blankets as he heads for his new tent quarters. (Courtesy of Imperial War Museum)

other by barbed wire. The camp's complete perimeter totaled $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles (just over 7km); it had a capacity of 60,000, though initially it held closer to 45,000. The Belgian 12th Fusiliers Battalion handled security, but the camp commander, Colonel King, and his staff were British.

Initial processing was much as in other camps: searches, providing information, drawing rations and blankets, some hygienic attention, and waiting in line for everything. Once processed, however, Dekker and his five Volkssturm comrades were assigned a tent along with Corporal (*Gefreiter*) Johann Mayr, an army quartermaster truck driver who had been captured near Haldern. Their new home was a tent similar to their previous one, though a little smaller, with rough wooden flooring and straw-filled sacks for bedding. A nice improvement, everyone agreed.

Corporal Mayr was the group's ranking prisoner (the others were *Volkssturmmänner* and equivalent to privates) and therefore responsible, according to camp regulations, for his tent mates. The British maintained a chain of command among the prisoners to create a formal channel for communication. While this assisted the captors, it benefited the prisoners themselves by enabling them to express needs and concerns and minimizing any prisoners' efforts to exploit other inmates. It also enabled prisoners to organize efforts to improve drainage, build walkways, dig latrines, and make other aesthetic or hygienic improvements to their living areas. The prisoners' commanders also organized activities including sporting events (football was particularly popular), religious services, music (both singing and instrumental), intellectual activities (classes, readings, lectures, etc.), and other diversions (chess and card tournaments, etc.). As time passed, more and more Germans were put to work full or part time as kitchen helps, stevedores, clerical workers, and in other necessary facets of camp operation. In spite of the prisoners' best efforts, however, camp life remained largely monotonous.

The hundreds of thousands of Germans who surrendered in the war's final weeks significantly strained Allied POW arrangements; and

RIGHT A newly arrived POW receives, from a fellow POW working for the British, basic rations of biscuits and bully beef. (Courtesy of Imperial War Museum)



maintaining order and providing prisoners with food, shelter, and sanitation took precedence over entertainment.

That camp conditions did not worsen significantly was attributed to Nazi Germany's surrender in early May. This enabled the Allied High Command to decree that German forces were not prisoners of war but "Disarmed Enemy Personnel" (DEP) who did not have to be processed through the regular POW camps. Prisoners at Overisje never faced serious problems with hunger (as in some camps), but rations were rather monotonous and bland. Normal fare included oatmeal porridge, bread or biscuits, and potatoes; meat was limited to canned corned beef and the occasional sausage. Canned or dried fruits and vegetables or preserves appeared only infrequently. Overall, however, Otto Dekker and his comrades had sufficient calories despite the food's quality and monotony. They were unaware that civilians in many places faced food shortages.

A widespread complaint among prisoners was lack of mail. They could procure writing material from the tiny camp canteen and wrote letters regularly; but though camp regulations allowed incoming mail, almost no one received any. The only letters or packages that arrived were the few sent to individual prisoners from neutral countries such as Switzerland. Dekker and his comrades griped and fretted constantly about this, always blaming their captors for the problem, but it was actually the German postal system that had collapsed. Of course this did not ease the prisoners' concerns for their families' well-being nor did it satisfy their desire to know that their loved ones knew that their men had indeed survived the war.

The flood of prisoners caught the Allies somewhat unprepared and each force dealt with it differently. The pragmatic British approach, dictated partially by their strained resources, was to sort prisoners into categories based on the individual German's apparent support for Nazism. Those deemed ardently Nazi were labeled "black," Nazi sympathizers were "gray," and those with limited or no Nazi sympathies were labeled "white." This sorting was based on unit membership – e.g. Waffen-SS (the military

arm of the SS) and paratroopers were automatically black – as well as Party membership, and answers to a questionnaire called the "CRI form." This solicited information about political activities, civilian employment, job skills, next of kin, and other details.

The British (and Americans) also adopted a rather pragmatic approach to Volkssturm prisoners. Given their age they presented health problems and would not be useful as labor for dismantling obstacles, moving rubble, or clearing mine fields, but would be needed at home in essential civilian occupations. Lastly, the Volkssturm was hardly rife with fanatical Nazis although there were enough individual exceptions to require screening them. Ironically, when the British began discharging Volkssturm men, rumors surfaced that they were headed for Great Britain because they had been labeled "black" due to Nazi Party control of the militia. In reality, the British released Volkssturm men who lived in the British zone of occupation and were engaged in an occupation deemed necessary for reconstruction.

Therefore, Otto Dekker and other Volkssturm men at Overisje found themselves high on the list for being shipped home in June. Dekker and other Volkssturm prisoners first reported to the camp's administrative processing area where screening revealed that few of these men were members of the Party or its affiliated organizations. Those released were mostly farmers, miners, or in food or wood processing occupations, so Dekker proudly assumed that the British recognized his importance to IHF. This pride quickly dissipated when a German medical orderly commented that Dekker was finally getting the medical discharge that his limp should have earned him the previous fall.

The relief Dekker and his Volkssturm comrades felt at leaving Overisje was dampened by their return journey. The British did not simply take them home; they were bounced through a series of temporary stopovers in various POW installations across northwestern Germany. Some were relatively comfortable, but others were temporary field enclosures. The worst was just prior to crossing the Rhine at Wesel, when Dekker's Volkssturm group was housed at Büberich, a camp that was little more than a large field enclosed by barbed wire. Improvements were minimal and it appeared that a large number of prisoners had been confined there



LEFT An overview of a Canadian-run transit camp for German POWs. Note the very rudimentary accommodations at this camp. (Courtesy of Canadian Library and Archives)

at some point. Indeed, Buderich had been the northernmost of the so-called “*Rheinwiesenslager*” (literally Rhine meadow camps) hastily established by the Americans. After learning more about these camps, Dekker was thankful that he only spent one night there while waiting for transport. In fact, the British were in the process of closing down this camp even as Dekker passed through.

After about a week – though it seemed much longer – the “*Overijser Volkssturm*” as they were calling themselves arrived at their destination, the *Entlassungslager* (Prisoner Release Processing Center) in Münster. The British processed all their POWs here for release to return home and many remained here for days until everything was properly documented. Otto Dekker’s stay was brief, however, as the British were eager to lighten their POW burden and *Volkssturm* men were of little potential value or risk. Dekker was released the day after arriving in Münster.

RETURNING HOME

Upon leaving the *Entlassungslager*, Otto Dekker was authorized to catch a ride in a British supply truck from Münster to Rees by way of Wesel. From Rees he traveled the final 6 miles (10km) on foot to Isselburg. Just outside Rees, British military police stopped him but were satisfied by his military discharge certificate. Upon arrival in Isselburg, he had instructions to report to the local police, register with the employment exchange and the ration (food and clothing) boards, and get his civilian identification card. Thus by the end of June Dekker was again a civilian.

Of course, Dekker’s first destination in Isselburg was not the local authorities, but his own home. As he entered town, Dekker felt anxiety and anticipation. The town bore the scars of war and, since these were more from air attack than from ground combat, Dekker’s concern for his family’s safety grew. He knew that aerial attacks had generated extensive collateral property damage and civilian casualties. Rounding the corner of his street, he was immensely relieved that his block appeared intact and much as it was when he had last seen it in February.

When Dekker attempted to open his door, he realized he had left his key and other personal belongings at his quarters in Dornick. So he knocked loudly, calling out “Helga Dekker, it’s me, Otto! I’m home!” What followed was the pounding of feet on the stairs and shrieks of happiness from all the Dekker women. Of course, a long debriefing session ensued as everyone caught up with the other family members’ experiences of the past months and on the current situation in Isselburg. Similarly extensive interrogations by Dekker’s relatives, friends, and neighbors came in the following days. Questions not only concerned Dekker himself, but were more often about the fate of other members of Isselburg’s Levy I *Volkssturm* company. Dekker felt badly that he had definitive answers on the fate of only a handful of his comrades; but fortunately the news he had on these men was positive. The only men from his unit whom he was certain had died or been wounded had met their fate in March and their next of kin already knew the bad news.

One of the big concerns in Germany during summer 1945 was fear of “DPs,” the common English abbreviation for displaced persons. This official term referred to individuals who had left their homes –



LEFT A member of the Canadian Provost Corps conducts one of the ubiquitous searches of German POWs before having them board trucks for transport to a processing center from which they will be released to return to their homes. (Courtesy of Canadian Library and Archives)

voluntarily or by force – due to the war. In Isselburg, this meant foreign workers. Those who had been employed locally, such as those at the Isselburger Holzwarenfabrik, had departed quickly and the few Dutch and Belgians who passed through on their way home were no problem. But everyone in town heard rumors of marauding gangs of eastern Europeans who were looking for both sustenance and revenge, though few had actually experienced violence. More common were unpleasant encounters with DPs involving harsh words and the implied threat of force rather than the actual use of it. Dekker was extraordinarily thankful that Helga would no longer have to worry about protecting herself and their increasingly mature teenage daughters.

Attitudes towards the British occupiers included resentment and Isselburgers felt victimized by Allied strategic and tactical bombing. Destruction in Isselburg had been heaviest near the rail lines and strafing or errant bombs damaged many homes. By comparison an air raid had leveled Emmerich, and ground fighting had done the same in Wesel. Of course, Isselburgers who suffered damage were bitter and not consoled by hearing that it could have been worse.

Shortages generated widespread disgruntlement. Clothing and shoes were virtually unavailable; people simply had to make do with what they had or find someone with whom they could barter. The summer months kept fuel needs minimal, but cooler fall weather made heating and cooking considerably more challenging. Food rations were rather meager and monotonous; bread and potatoes comprised much of the less than 2,000 calorie-a-day official diet. Vegetables, fruits, and dairy products were occasionally available but never plentiful in Isselburg. It

was, of course, possible to supplement one's official rations by bartering or resorting to the black market, but these methods could be expensive or even dangerous. Personally, Dekker did not initially find the food situation too bad, though as winter approached things had not significantly improved. All things considered, he believed that his personal diet in 1945 had been at its best in the POW camp at Overisje.

Isselburgers could have turned their personal insecurity, resentment over property damages, or frustration over material shortages into anger against the occupying British. Generally, however, this did not happen. British military occupation authorities were fair and made efforts to make improvements. Although rationing was unpleasant, at least it was equal and guaranteed everyone a basic amount of food. British troops were generally well behaved and made a genuine effort to control the DP situation. Moreover, Britain's quick release of POWs helped facilitate reconstruction efforts in its zone. Otto Dekker's experience with the British was not unique; that of others, too, was generally positive, so that individuals like him were not inclined to foment anti-British sentiment.

Isselburg's support for Nazism dropped sharply in 1945. Certainly, there was nostalgia for the peaceful 1930s, but the war clearly exposed local Nazi leaders as charlatans. They had dragooned boys and old men into the war effort and had made threats about enforcing a battle to the last man, but when Allied troops had actually appeared, they had either fled or shed their uniforms and tried to blend in with everyone else. Germany had plainly lost this war and by mid-1945 most people in Isselburg – and elsewhere – blamed the Nazis for it and considered themselves victims of their former leaders. Most were simply ready to forget and move on with their lives.

Isselburgers were already beginning to move forward even as Otto Dekker returned in June. Rubble had been quickly cleared from the streets, and the roadblocks the Volkssturm had worked so hard to construct were dismantled and their logs used for fuel or lumber. The week after returning home, Dekker went to IHF to discuss his job. Air attacks against the rail line had damaged the factory but it was still operable at reduced capacity. Heinrich Ziegler genuinely and heartily welcomed Dekker. The factory's biggest challenge was to secure adequate manpower as the foreign laborers were gone and only a few skilled German workers had not been conscripted. Those who had been drafted were either POWs or DEPs, and in either case were not coming back soon. Dekker still felt a twinge of resentment that Ziegler had not requested a Levy II Z-Card for him last fall; but he held his tongue as it was clear that IHF needed his services and he needed to get back to work. Moreover, Dekker felt justice served when Heinrich related that his brother, Oskar – the man who had received the Z-Card that Dekker had expected – was in a British detention camp because of his Nazi connections.

Thus, by July, Otto Dekker's world had been restored and his time in the Volkssturm became just a rather unpleasant memory. Indeed, Volkssturm service generated none of the bonding and camaraderie that was relived, renewed, and celebrated after the war in German veterans' organizations. Perhaps due to the brevity of its existence, perhaps because of its poor combat record, perhaps because of the relatively advanced age of its members, or perhaps for myriad other

reasons, Volkssturm veterans' organizations never became a feature of post-war Germany. It is, however, fittingly symbolic that this militia, created by the Nazis as an expression of the mystical bonds of the German national community (*Volksgemeinschaft*), was ultimately something that most Germans who served in it simply wanted to forget except as a symbol of the failure of the Nazi Party.

AFTERWORD: COLLECTING AND RECOLLECTING

For many years, Volkssturm items sparked little collector interest. Lately, however, as with everything from the Nazi era, Volkssturm militaria have become much prized. Unfortunately, this has also sparked increases in prices, forgeries, and fakes. Virtually any pre-1946 item of military equipment, uniform, or weapon might well have been issued to a *Volkssturmmann*. Most was of German design and manufacture, but the Volkssturm used captured foreign uniforms and equipment as well. When seeking items that were certainly used by the militia, look for Volkssturm armbands (there are many variations), rank collar patches (black with one to four silver pips – generally not edged with silver piping), identity disks, paybooks, documents, and photographs. As always, the many reliable dealers in military collectibles are the best sources though even they are occasionally duped and inadvertently sell items that are not exactly original. Many dealers now have webpages and there are good online militaria auction sites (e.g. manions.com). EBay is a wonderful source, though many items there are inaccurately described or fakes. The good news is that there is a great deal of Volkssturm material out there, but you must educate yourself first.

Few museums, even in Germany, devote much attention to the Volkssturm. Those which do address it include the Gedenkstätte/Museum "Seelower Höhen" in Seelow, which discusses the Volkssturm's role in defending the Oder Front in 1945. There are samples of German weaponry, including models of the *Volksgewehr* (People's Rifle) produced for Volkssturm use, at the Wehrtechnisches Museum in Koblenz. Overall, though, the Volkssturm merits little more than a footnote in museum collections. However it does make a cameo appearance in virtually any museum that addresses the end of World War II in Europe, for example the Wehrgeschichtliches Museum in Rastatt or the Auto & Technik Museum Sinsheim.

Just as Volkssturm veterans showed no inclination to organize themselves to pursue their common interests, World War II reenactors have given the militia scant attention, in spite of the fact that Volkssturm reenacting would be considerably cheaper and easier than, say, recreating *Panzergranadier* actions. Virtually any type of period clothing, equipment, and weaponry would pass muster; and whereas a graying, paunchy *Fallschirmjäger* would be viewed negatively, age and lack of fitness would be a hallmark of historical correctness with Volkssturm men. There is a group of men headquartered in Indiana who are interested in Volkssturm reenacting, though they have not organized a formal unit as of the end of 2005. Contact them at Volkssturm-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

GLOSSARY

Altrhein a former channel of the Rhine that is now an oxbow lake, near Dornick

Ardenne Offensive German counteroffensive in mid-December 1944 against American units in the Ardennes Forest; Americans refer to this as The Battle of the Bulge

Army Reporting Office *Wehrmeldeamt*. One of the local recruitment offices throughout Germany that were responsible for assigning the relevant conscription priorities to all German men in their area

Beer Hall Putsch effort by Hitler's Nazi Party in Munich to try to overthrow the Weimar Republic, on November 9, 1923

Blockleiter block leader. The lowest Nazi Party official, responsible for an area within a town or a city block and reporting to an *Ortsgruppenleiter*

DEP Disarmed Enemy Personnel. German military personnel who surrendered after May 7 and the war's end

DP Displaced Person(s). Anyone whom the war had removed from his/her home

flak *Fliegerabwehrkanone*. Anti-aircraft artillery or a barrage by such guns

Gau one of the 42 regional divisions of the Nazi Party in Germany

Gauleiter top Nazi Party official in each of the 42 German *Gau*

German Labor Front (DAF) Nazi Party-affiliated organization that replaced Germany's trade unions

Geweer Dutch word for rifle

Gewehr German word for rifle

Grietherorter Altrhein an old Rhine channel that is now an oxbow lake, near Grietherbusch

Hague Regulations the basic rules governing land warfare as of 1944–45

HJ Hitler Jugend. The Hitler Youth formation

IHF Isselburger Holzwarenfabrik. The Isselburg Millwork (woodworking) Factory, Otto Dekker's fictitious employer

Jabo *Jagdbomber*. German slang term for fighter-bombers or fighter planes on strafing missions

Jäger literally "hunter." A designation for a mobile unit. Battalion 38/20 used this designation for its elite company of its best-trained and fittest men

Kar98k standard German infantry rifle

Kreis local subdivision of Nazi Party *Gau*

Kreisleiter top local Nazi Party official in each *Kreis*

Kreisleitung the *Kreis* Nazi Party leadership staff, headed by the *Kreisleiter*

Landsturm a popular levy decreed by Prussian King Frederick William III in 1813 to harass Napoleon's rear areas during the War of Liberation

Landwehr an organized militia decreed by Prussian King Frederick William III in 1813 to help the Prussian Army defeat Napoleon and maintained as a part of the army for decades afterward

Levy *Aufgebot*. One of the four personnel divisions within the Volkssturm

Luftschutz civilian air raid protection service in Nazi Germany

Luftwaffe Nazi Germany's air force

MG *Maschinengewehr*. Machine-gun

Millinger Meer an old Rhine channel that is now an oxbow lake, near Millingen

MP *Maschinenpistole*. Submachine-gun

NSDAP *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*. The Nazi Party

NSFO *Nationalsozialistische Führungsoffizier* (National Socialist Leadership Officer). Political officer attached to German units with the purpose of providing for the indoctrination of troops

OKH *Oberkommando des Heeres*. German Army High Command mainly in charge of the Eastern Front

Operation Nordwind (Northwind) German counteroffensive in Lorraine in January 1945

Ortsgruppenleiter local Nazi official in charge of the subdivisions of a *Kreis*

Panzerfaust literally "armor fist." A German rocket-propelled anti-tank projectile

Panzergrenadier armored infantry

Panzerschreck German copy of the American bazooka anti-tank rocket launcher

Panzerwarndienst Armor Warning Service. An effort to provide an early warning system of observers who would report Allied armor advances

Papierkrieg Paper War. A German military slang term referring to the struggle to keep up with bureaucratic routine and paperwork

Parachute Division an airborne infantry division. By the end of the war they were incapable of conducting airborne operations but were often formidable infantrymen

POWs prisoners of war. Here, German troops who surrendered prior to May 7, 1945

Reichsstrasse Nazi German national highway

Replacement Army *Ersatzheer*. The training cadres and recruitment apparatus for the German military inside Germany itself

SA *Sturmabteilung*. Nicknamed the "Brown Shirts," a Nazi Party-affiliated paramilitary group

SS *Schutzstaffeln*. Nazi Party-affiliated organization headed by Heinrich Himmler that by 1944 had become a massive institution that dominated police matters in Nazi Germany

V-1 nicknamed the "buzz bomb," a plane-like rocket-powered missile

V-2 a long-range missile that carried a high explosive warhead

Volk German nation, race, or people

Volksgemeinschaft literally "Racial Community." The ultimate Nazi goal of creating a unified German community where all Germans were accepted and respected and adhered to Nazi principles obediently and fanatically

Volksopfer literally "People's Sacrifice." The clothing drive that requested donations of spare uniform parts and equipment from

Volksschule German equivalent to an elementary or primary school

Wehrkraftersetzung Undermining the War Effort. A Nazi law very flexibly applied in the war's last months to any actions officials deemed detrimental to the war. It could carry a punishment of execution

Wehrkreis One of the 16 regional administrative commands of the Replacement Army

Wehrmacht the Nazi German armed forces

Westfalenwall German fall back position behind the Lower Rhine, based on the Issel River

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COLOR PLATE COMMENTARY

A: VOLKSSTURMMANN OTTO DEKKER IN DORNICK, MARCH 1945

(1) Otto Dekker, here depicted fully equipped on active combat duty on the Niederrhein, wearing an eclectic mix of uniform and equipment typical of the Volkssturm. His "feldblau" (field blue) *Fliegerbluse* Luftwaffe tunic and trousers are of wool-blend cloth. The tunic bears no collar rank tabs or epaulettes but retains the Luftwaffe pattern national eagle on the right front. Dekker lacks a uniform shirt and wears his civilian undershirt beneath the tunic. Dekker has attached the standard "Deutscher Volkssturm – Wehrmacht" armband on the tunic's upper left sleeve. His footwear consists of Italian-manufactured lace-up boots and he wears a standard army issue black leather belt. Attached to his belt are brown leather double cartridge pouches of Dutch standard military manufacture to hold spare ammunition for his Dutch Gewehr 95. Dekker's helmet is a "gladiator"-type *Luftschutz* (air raid defense) helmet painted dark field gray over its normal dark navy blue finish. Volkssturm units often received these helmets either from unissued stocks or from those donated to the *Volksopfer* collection drives.

(2) Dutch Gewehr 95 (Wehrmacht nomenclature: Gewehr 211 (h)) rifle, a pre-World War I design produced at the Hembrug armory for Dutch troops. A bolt-action rifle, it fired 6.5mm cartridges from a five-round magazine. Most of 3rd Company, Battalion 38/20 was armed with these captured rifles.

(3) Dekker's standard M40 "feldgrau" army wool overcoat without epaulettes or national eagle and with dull silver double-breasted buttons. On the left upper arm is the standard "Deutscher Volkssturm – Wehrmacht" armband.

(4) A zinc (or aluminum) identification disk. The "D.V." engraving is for Deutscher Volkssturm, the numbers are for Battalion 38/20, 3rd Company. The 19 denotes Dekker's company roster number. The center perforations are there so that if the bearer is killed one half remains with the body for identification, while the other half provides a record of the death.

(5) A Volkssturm paybook. The 16 pages listed information on identification (including a photo), equipment issued, health, and service record. Many Volkssturm men simply used their standard German Army paybook (right), a 52-page document with full personal and military service information.

(6) A common Volkssturm cap made – often by hand in homes of female volunteers – along the lines of the M43 field cap, though many lacked the national eagle or roundel.

(7) A full view of the standard Volkssturm armband; most were screened on cotton although there were many other variations in material and pattern.

B: VOLKSSTURM OATH-TAKING CEREMONY

Three Volkssturm men taking the oath of loyalty to the nation and Hitler swear their allegiance on a battalion flag donated by the local SA unit. They graphically illustrate the Volkssturm's typically wide range of attire, particularly in its early phase. The man on the right wears a civilian overcoat with the standard Volkssturm armband and a used M1916 army helmet from World War I. He employs the two-fingered salute traditionally used by Germans taking an oath. In contrast, the man on the left, wearing his SA uniform also

adorned with the standard armband, salutes with the Nazi "Heil." The third man, in the center, wears a standard M43 pattern army cap and M40 army field gray overcoat with the shoulder epaulettes removed.

C: VOLKSSTURM SQUAD DEFENSE OF A ROADBLOCK (ISSELBURG)

To conceal roadblocks from enemy detection, the Germans often located them as illustrated in the main sketch, around a bend in the road between two buildings. The upper right insert shows the roadblock's construction. Laborers placed four pairs of parallel vertical supports made from lengths of tree trunks into holes dug into the roadbed and sidewalk. Between the vertical supports they built parallel walls of heavy wooden timbers and filled the space between the walls with rubble and dirt. Total height varied, usually between 5 and 7ft (1.5 and 2m). The roadblock's center section remained open as long was feasible in order to leave the road passable.

The main sketch shows a bird's eye view of a nine-man Volkssturm squad deployed to defend a roadblock. The main position is in the inn or *Gasthaus* left of the road. The squad leader (*Gruppenführer*) occupies a second floor side window with a good view of the road leading into town. Also on the second floor at a front window is the squad's light machine-gun positioned behind a barricade of furniture to maximize concealment and cover while giving an excellent field of fire against enemy infantry. The squad's two *Panzerfaust* operators are positioned on either side of the road, with one concealed at a hole in the wall of the *Gasthaus*' beer garden and the other in a rifle pit in the garden behind the house across the street. A wooden picket fence provides his cover. Both are concealed but also have a decent shot at any tank approaching the roadblock. Two other riflemen are positioned in the windows of the house on the right and the final squad member is in a rifle pit at the back of the garden. The riflemen are armed with Italian Mannlicher-Carcano 6.5mm carbines and are positioned to provide covering fire against approaching infantry. Success would depend on the Volkssturm squad holding its fire until the enemy tank was within range of its *Panzerfäuste* – approximately 33, 66, or 110 yards (30, 60, or 100m) depending upon the model.

D: VOLKSSTURM RIVER DEFENSE POSITION (DORNICK/NIEDERRHEIN)

This sketch depicts 3rd Company, Battalion "Rückriem" (38/20) defensive positions along the Lower Rhine near Dornick, March 1945. One platoon is deployed in rifle pits in the oak woods along the riverbank. An MG81 position located along the riverbank with a maximum field of fire provides heavy firepower, with additional supporting fire coming from the unit's riflemen and perhaps a rifle grenade launcher. The entire position can also call on the battalion's 81mm mortar battery for support. Another platoon of the company is deployed in firing positions on the reverse side of the dyke that roughly parallels the Rhine. Again, a machine-gun position, this time an MG42, is situated to achieve a maximum field of fire. This platoon has the added



LEFT A Volkssturm officer scans the flat terrain typical of the Niederrhein area of northwestern Germany, looking for enemy activity. (Courtesy of W. Darrin Weaver Collection)

benefit of bunkers for shelter dug into the base of the dyke. Reserve and off-duty units billeted in the village of Dornick at the lower left. The company also maintains observation posts in the wood, in the attic of a building in Dornick, and in a small shed by the river.

E: VOLKSSTURM PANZERJÄGER, 1945

A member of Battalion 38/20's mobile anti-tank platoon mounted on his requisitioned civilian bicycle. He wears the "feldblau" standard Luftwaffe *Fliegerbluse* tunic (minus collar rank tabs and epaulettes) over a gray, buttoned uniform collar shirt, with the standard Volkssturm armband on his upper left sleeve. He also wears wool-blend Luftwaffe long trousers that he has bound above the ankles with string to avoid snagging his bicycle chain. He wears civilian work boots. His cap is a charcoal gray M43 pattern army field cap with insignia. His standard issue army belt sports the standard triple black leather cartridge pouches for the Mauser Kar98k carbine slung over his back. Attached to either side of the bicycle's front fork is a sand-colored *Panzerfaust* 60 (so designated for the model's range in meters). The other sketches show the *Panzerfaust* assembled and ready for firing. Note the warnings printed on this new and rather dangerous (for firer and target) weapon. The final sketch shows the *Panzerfaust* warhead with its stabilizing fins deployed after firing.

F: VOLKSSTURMMANN SURRENDERING

Volkssturmmann Otto Dekker performing one of the most common Volkssturm activities in the spring of 1945, surrendering. His uniform, helmet, shoes, and equipment are the same as in Plate A, though here he wears his M40 army overcoat with its standard Volkssturm armband. To avoid confusion during the act of surrender, he holds his paybook in his left hand for identification purposes.

G: TOTAL MOBILIZATION PROPAGANDA POSTER

This poster reads "Hard Times, Hard Duties, Hard Hearts." Although produced in 1943 for the effort to replenish the depleted ranks of the Wehrmacht after Stalingrad, this poster sums up clearly the motive behind the Volkssturm. Germany was in a struggle for its very existence that demanded sacrifice from every person.

H: VOLKSSTURM PROPAGANDA POSTER

This Volkssturm propaganda poster reads: "It's about Freedom and Life: Volkssturm!" and depicts a determined Hitler Youth and equally resolute elderly *Volkssturmmann*. The idea was to demonstrate the solidarity of German manhood in defense of the Fatherland and to communicate that the serious military situation could be overcome only through obedience, bravery, and sacrifice by average Germans.



ABOVE One of the first steps in processing a newly arrived German POW at a British camp was a thorough search for weapons or contraband materials. (Courtesy of Imperial War Museum)

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Hitler's Home Guard: *Volkssturmmann*

Western Front, 1944–45

The creation of the Volkssturm was a desperate measure by the Nazi government; all able-bodied civilian males between the ages of 16 and 60 were conscripted. Poor equipment and lack of training took their toll on these men, who were not used to fighting and had little interest in needlessly dying for the Nazi regime. David K. Yelton follows the experience of a *Volkssturmmann* from his call-to-arms, through to his capture and treatment as a POW, examining his reaction to the creation of the German Home Guard and his response to the fighting into which he was thrust.

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